

SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2022.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact Gage Harter.

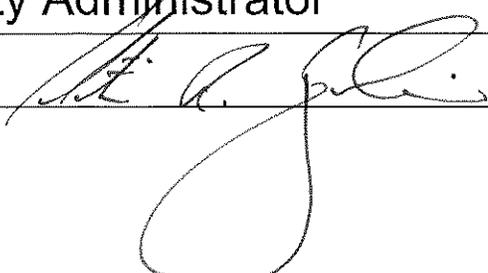
PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Louisa County
Program Title: Fiber Initiative Partnership
Program Category: Information Technology

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THE COUNTY OF LOUISA

2022 VACo Achievement Awards – Regional Partnership

PROGRAM NAME: FIBER INITIATIVE PARTNERSHIP

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Nomination

The Challenge

Those living in urban centers may be surprised by the true lack of high-speed internet access in some rural areas. However, the number of unserved locations in Louisa County illustrates the challenge quite clearly: high-speed internet service was not available to a staggering 15,500 locations out of 21,500 total Louisa County homes and businesses as of last year. As the digital divide intensifies with remote work and learning needs, Louisa County is actively working to solve this long-standing issue with a logical, efficient approach.

Partnering for a Solution

Previous efforts to bring traditional high-speed installation to the area had largely stalled as the year 2020 arrived. Given the desire for a countywide solution, the County made three enormously impactful

decisions on its path forward: 1.) The County would consider up to \$15M in project incentives; 2.) A shared effort among multiple partners was necessary; and 3.) The County would leverage its electric service providers. In 2021, Louisa County finalized a partnership with its three electric service providers – Central Virginia Electric Cooperative (CVEC), Rappahannock Electric Cooperative (REC), and Dominion Energy Virginia – and had an achievable plan with defined responsibilities for each partner in place.

The Technical Approach

Throughout Louisa County, a fiber-optic network is being installed on and adjacent to existing overhead and underground electric distribution lines, utilizing existing infrastructure. The first phase in the fiber construction process is field engineering and once complete, make ready construction crews move in to make modifications to the utility poles and change some poles. Following the make ready construction, fiber construction begins as the fiber optic cable is added to the electric facilities. After that step, splicing takes place and then service extensions are added. The entire fiber construction process takes six to eight months from the beginning of make ready engineering to the final connections inside homes/businesses.

The three electric service providers in Louisa each serve a critical role in the partnership:

*CVEC - Firefly Fiber Broadband*SM (a wholly-owned subsidiary of CVEC) will be the internet service provider for the partnership and will ensure the availability of fiber broadband on a county-wide basis, regardless of a home or business' electric service provider. As Firefly is a wholly-owned subsidiary of CVEC, the fiber-optic network is being installed on and adjacent to CVEC electric distribution lines. CVEC will own and maintain its fiber lines.

REC - REC is providing use of its infrastructure, including significant infrastructure improvements to make the Louisa County broadband initiative a reality. Firefly will oversee construction of the fiber in the REC service territory and then be responsible for network operation and fiber maintenance.

Dominion Energy - As it moves forward with the efforts to modernize Virginia's energy grid, Dominion Energy is working to provide "middle-mile" fiber optic cable infrastructure that can also be used to bridge the digital gap and reduce broadband deployment costs in Louisa County. Firefly will lease the "middle-mile" fiber installed by Dominion Energy in the company's electric service area in Louisa County.

Progress

As Firefly makes final connections in homes throughout the County, the needle has moved from 72% without high-speed internet access to 64%. While more than half the County still remains without high-speed access, these numbers represent tremendous progress in a relatively short timeframe. It was originally estimated that 50% of the County would have access by the end of 2023, and 75% by the end of 2024. However, the project is progressing ahead of schedule which is promising to Louisa citizens. The project completion is slated by the end of 2025.

Impact in Central Virginia Region

This partnership created a blueprint to allow other localities to embark on similar efforts. This facet of the effort has attracted widespread interest in the region, and the electric service partners are collaborating with other localities to expand offerings beyond Louisa's borders. In fact, in December 2021, \$79 million was awarded in Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI) grants to Firefly and REC. The funding will support the \$288 million project which endeavors to offer universal access to gigabit speed

broadband service to 36,000 unserved homes and businesses in 13 counties in Central Virginia, including Louisa. The VATI grants are anticipated to greatly accelerate the Firefly project.

Executive Summary

Broadband deployment in rural areas has been an ongoing challenge across the nation. The most successful approach to this problem has involved leveraging partnerships and combining sources of funding to ensure financial viability where otherwise such might not exist. In September 2020, the Louisa County Board of Supervisors unanimously earmarked \$15 million to incentivize the deployment of end-user fiber on a countywide basis. Efforts to provide broadband internet service in Louisa County took a leap forward in 2021 when Louisa County finalized a historic partnership with Firefly Fiber Broadband, Rappahannock Electric Cooperative and Dominion Energy to ensure high-speed internet access is available to all of the homes and business in the County.

Throughout Louisa County, a fiber-optic network is being installed on and adjacent to existing overhead and underground electric distribution lines, utilizing existing infrastructure. Firefly Fiber BroadbandSM (a wholly-owned subsidiary of CVEC) will be the internet service provider for the partnership and will ensure the availability of fiber broadband on a county-wide basis, regardless of a home or business' electric service provider.

High-speed internet service was not available to 15,500 locations out of 21,500 total Louisa County homes and businesses as of last year. As Firefly makes final connections in homes throughout the County, the needle has moved from 72% without high-speed internet access to 64%. It was originally estimated that 50% of the County would have access by the end of 2023, and 75% by the end of 2024. The project completion is slated by the end of 2025.

Program Overview

In 2021, Louisa County finalized a partnership with Firefly Fiber Broadband (a wholly-owned subsidiary of Central Virginia Electric Cooperative), Rappahannock Electric Cooperative (REC), and Dominion Energy Virginia to ensure high-speed internet access is made available to all of the homes and businesses in the County. The initiative will leverage the existing electrical infrastructure in the County, installing a fiber-optic network on and adjacent to existing overhead and underground electric distribution lines.

Firefly Fiber BroadbandSM (a wholly-owned subsidiary of CVEC) will be the internet service provider for the partnership. Firefly's pricing is the same regardless of a home or business' electric service provider, and is positioned to be fair to customers as it has no hidden equipment costs, special introductory pricing or usage limits.

It was originally estimated that 50% of the County would have high-speed internet access by the end of 2023, 75% would have access by the end of 2024, and the project would be complete in 2025. However, the project is progressing ahead of schedule which is promising to Louisa citizens. Citizens are encouraged to check fireflyva.com for construction updates.

Supplemental Materials



Figure 1- County Officials and utility partners announce the partnership at a press conference

Press Release and Project Frequently Asked Questions: <https://www.louisacounty.com/2386/Fiber-Broadband-Partnership---Press-Rele>

Press conference video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVepkgV1tuY>

News coverage regarding the partnership:

- <https://www.nbc29.com/2021/03/02/louisa-county-announces-partnership-bring-internet-all-homes-businesses-by/>

- <https://www.cbs19news.com/story/43427461/update-provided-on-louisa-county-broadband-expansion-efforts>
- https://richmond.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-real-broadband-solutions-require-more-than-money/article_9bf9765b-68b0-57de-99b7-ab1cff852117.html

For more information about the fiber construction project and a map of the project area, please visit www.fireflyva.com/partners.