Riverside County Launches Request for Participants to Build Countywide Fiber-Optic Network

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Riverside County put out a call today (4/3) for private-sector partners interested in developing the nation’s largest broadband network, a project that would stimulate economic growth, improve healthcare capabilities, expand educational opportunities and make high-speed networks available to all residents and businesses countywide.

The RIVCOconnect Broadband Initiative is a $2 billion to $4 billion public-private partnership with the goal of building a gigabit fiber network. This project marks the first time in the nation that a regional public/private partnership has worked to deploy fiber optic infrastructure on such a large scale in partnership with multiple local governments.

The county’s 7,200 square miles contain nearly one million homes, apartments, businesses, and institutions that need high-speed internet access. Broadband grows more important daily because vast amounts of data must be transmitted quickly and efficiently to support hospitals and medical offices, school systems, businesses and other needs. Businesses and service providers commonly locate their operations in areas where high speed broadband is readily available, unlike in the Riverside County region. If the initiative can deploy gigabit service, the county and its partners could offer businesses
worldwide affordable high-speed internet access, a lower cost-of-living than much of urbanized California, and access to a large local labor pool.

The project does not rely on taxpayer dollars and the county and its cities are not seeking to own or operate this fiber network. Rather, RIVCOconnect is designed to facilitate the private sector’s deployment of a fiber network. It will interest network providers because, over time, they already need to build fiber infrastructure themselves to reach and serve customers. The public private partnership is attractive because a network of municipal partners could make construction and deployment far less expensive.

Collaborating local jurisdictions – the county, its 28 cities, and participating tribal nations – have adopted a common resolution to support the effort. Each partner has agreed to streamline and expedite often cumbersome permitting processes. Among the ideas are “dig-once” policies that allow fiber conduits to be installed whenever a roadway is opened for construction, and coordinating activities countywide through a single point of contact. Those ideas and others could help eliminate hurdles that could amount to as much as 30 percent of construction costs, potentially saving hundreds of millions of dollars on such a project.

A gigabit network also would serve modern society’s need for greater communications capacity, created by interconnections that provide services like smart street- and traffic-light systems; high-capacity video monitoring of homes, schools and businesses; and applications that let parents to know when children come home from school and that the doors are locked. These interconnections require a vast mosaic of sensors and switches that create greater security and higher quality of life. Supporting these and other changes requires wired and wireless networks powered by regional fiber-optic broadband networks.

A regional network to support teleconferencing also offers an alternative to commuting for workers who otherwise would be stuck for hours in stifling traffics. Similarly, telehealth makes remote doctor visits over the computer possible but demands high-resolution video that antiquated copper-wire and coax networks cannot accommodate. Fiber also would meet colleges’ and universities’ need for broadband to conduct research and remote classrooms.

A gigabit network can stream high-definition video content with little to no delays, enabling smoother use of Facetime, Skype, Facebook, Google and other streaming services without poor video quality, buffering or disconnection due to unavailable bandwidth. Gigabit internet is the next generation of broadband technology and it is 159 times faster than the global broadband average of 6.3 Mbps.

A significant part of the RIVCOconnect broadband plan involves working with the selected broadband partner, and with other organizations in the county, in an effort to close the Digital Divide. It has been a
county priority go enable residents to participate fully in the economy. Beyond that goal, a gigabit network also benefits broadband providers because it creates new market opportunities.

The release of the request for participants is expected to close in August. A telecommunications partner or partners will be selected in the fall to build out the gigabit fiber network.

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