

## Grant could help Graham County get faster internet

By Mary Glen Hatcher Eastern Arizona Courier Dec 25, 2021

Increased broadband internet access could be coming to western parts of the Gila Valley as soon as 2023. The Graham County Board of Supervisors on Monday approved a resolution to partner with Valley Telecom Group for a grant that would bring fiber optic internet connection to homes and businesses in the areas of Pima, Bryce, Eden and Fort Thomas.

The grant is part of the Arizona Broadband Development Grant Program (ABDG) – a \$100 million project under the Arizona Commerce Authority that represents one of the largest broadband investments in state history. The funding is focused on helping communities to construct or improve broadband infrastructure in rural areas.

“It’s a federal grant specific to rural Arizona, and that’s why our board was particularly anxious to get this done,” Graham County Supervisor Paul David said.

“Ordinarily, when we’re competing against metropolitan areas, we have a much lower success rate. We hate reading about other areas that took a chance, put money into a project and do see that success. So we thought, why not us? And we have high hopes,” he said.

After surveying a number of underserved areas, the board decided to expand broadband access northwest from Thatcher for this project, as Thatcher is the current terminus of fiber internet in Graham County.

Valley Telecom invested around \$9 million to bring fiber internet capability to the Town of Thatcher, and completed its first round of residential connections in October.

“We really admired what Valley Telecom had done in Thatcher, and we really jumped at this opportunity because we’ve seen the return and the benefit to our county residents,” David said.

The pandemic also laid bare the importance of better internet connectivity for daily life.

“Whether it’s school kids or people working from home, COVID definitely emphasized the fact that high-speed connectivity was missing, and because we don’t have four or five million to get into the business ourselves or the expertise for something like this, we thought partnering on this project, in essence, was the best way to deliver broadband to these communities,” David said.

Depending on the outcome of this grant cycle, David said the county’s success here could lead to further broadband expansion into the areas south and east of Safford, and between I-10 and Duncan.

“Of course, we’re still hopeful. It’ll be a bitter pill if we don’t get anything, but if we do, boy wouldn’t that be wonderful,” David said.

If awarded, both Graham County and Valley Telecom would match funds of up to \$480,000 for the grant, with the county using funds from its last round of COVID relief money from the American Rescue Plan Act to bolster its application.

The project in Graham is estimated to cost around \$4.5 million, Graham County Supervisor Danny Smith said.

“In a pre-COVID world, it would be kind of unusual for the county to be involved in such a thing because we don’t have the money to do such a thing,” Smith said.

“But there’s money for broadband out there, and we’re trying to make sure we’re not leaving money on the table because it’ll go to other communities if we don’t apply for it,” he said.

Compared to a satellite internet connection, a fiber internet connection can support higher bandwidth and data rates. Most satellite internet providers offer speeds between

25 and 150 megabytes-per-second (Mbps), whereas cable and fiber can reach over 1,000 Mbps (or one gigabit per second).

“With a fiber build, these communities will be able to get much more capacity,” said Heather Floyd, a spokesperson for Valley Telecom Group. “And just to be able to provide this level of service to a rural community...you can’t get this sort of service sometimes even in the bigger cities, so we’re ecstatic.”

## What’s next

Following the grant application deadline on Jan. 31, the Arizona Commerce Authority plans to announce grant recipients at the end of February. If the county’s project is selected, Floyd said things could move quickly.

“All the grants have to be used within 24 months, and we’re estimating we could be done in about a year. There’s about a three-month time period for permits and securing a contractor, and once we have all that lined up, it’s about an eight-month build-out,” she said.

Typically, only about a third of customers take the initial offering of a new internet provider, which adds up to about 300 households for this project, Floyd said, but once word gets out, interest will likely grow.

“That tends to be our experience, really, with any product. There’s always early adopters and then people who wait until a little bit afterwards to commit, but then once the product is out there, more people tend to start calling in,” she said.