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Arizonans have been hearing about federal and state funds to build broadband to unserved and underserved communities; and now, Arizona is dispersing some of those funds. On Tuesday, the Arizona Commerce Authority announced the awardees of the AZ State Broadband Development Grant Program.

Locally, Valley TeleCom Group (Valley) was awarded 3 grants. Those projects are the Fiber Investment for West Willcox Rural Community, the Santa Cruz County Patagonia Regional Broadband Project - Patagonia and the City of Safford Downtown WiFi Project.

**Fiber Investment for West Willcox Rural Community**

Valley was awarded grant funding to bring fiber internet to 8.2 square miles north of Interstate 10 in the Willcox Region. The cost of the project will be \$2,977,460 with Valley contributing matching funds of \$297,746. This project would install 46 miles of fiber and connect 513 households. This project will be 100% fiber optic Internet with the ability to operate at Gigabit speeds.

The awarding of this grant accelerates local broadband infrastructure investment; enhancing the speed, redundancy and reach of high-speed internet for customers, strengthening their capacity and competitiveness for economic growth – thereby improving the economic conditions and quality of life in rural Cochise County.

“As the City continues to grow, Valley Telecom plays an important role in economic development. Many areas the city is annexing do not have fiber. The Fiber Investment for West Willcox Rural Community project is essential and will provide additional housing options to our local workforce and will continue to spur economic development in Cochise County. This project also includes the City of Willcox Quail Park, increasing fiber Internet access to this vital community resource would be a benefit for the many events hosted at the park” wrote, Michael Laws, Mayor of Willcox in a letter to the ACA supporting the project.

**Santa Cruz County Regional Broadband Project – Patagonia**

Valley, in partnership with Santa Cruz County, was awarded grant funding to bring fiber internet to Patagonia, AZ. The cost of the project will be \$2,103,585 with Valley contributing matching funds of \$210,359. The Patagonia project will cover 1.26 square miles bringing access to fiber internet to 633 residential structures and businesses within the project footprint. This project will be 100% fiber optic Internet with the ability to operate at Gigabit speeds.

Building on a feasibility study commissioned by Santa Cruz County in 2020, the Patagonia Project is the first phase of a multi-phase approach to build out a middle mile network and provide fiber to the home and businesses to the most rural areas of Santa Cruz County. For Santa Cruz County and its local communities to successfully execute its economic plan and achieve future economic goals, high speed

broadband must be available and affordable to support business development, health care advancements and improve higher education opportunities in the area.

### **City of Safford Downtown Wifi Project**

The City of Safford was awarded an ACA AZ State Broadband Development Grant to install fiber optic cable, access points and other equipment required to provide broadband Internet in downtown Safford and at all Safford public parks including Glen Meadows, Firth, La Tierra, and El Paso Park (to be developed). The City of Safford is collaborating with Valley to provide the internet access and install the equipment necessary to allow residents and visitors to have free broadband internet access.

The project will address the broadband needs of low-income residents in Safford by offering internet access at no cost. The Census shows 75.6% of the populations has broadband internet but that means 24.4% of Safford populations and estimated 2,471 residents do not have broadband. The Safford City-Graham County library has over 115 people a day visit the library to access the internet, illustrating the need for more broadband access in Safford.

The Safford projects support the Arizona Broadband Development Grant priorities to accelerate broadband infrastructure, strengthening economic growth and economic conditions in rural Arizona. The project will provide a big impact for this rural city at a low cost.

“This grant directly speaks to SEAGO’s mission to enhance economic and social progress for communities in our four-county region. Inadequate broadband services marginalize our rural residents. These projects help to close the digital divide in Patagonia and the rural area west of Willcox. Providing high quality internet access that enhances opportunities for education, telemedicine, and connection to a broader society” stated, Randy Heiss, Executive Director of SEAGO in a letter to the ACA supporting the project.

The AZ State Broadband Development Grant Program was announced on November 15, 2021. The grant program had \$100M to award with \$75M designated specifically for rural areas. The minimum speed of 100/25mbps needed to be achieved to be eligible receive award funds. Proposed grants must have a minimum 10% match in funds with higher matches encouraged and a positive factor in evaluating the application.

The ACA received two times the number of applications that were anticipated, in total they had 87 applications to process for a total of more than \$400M. The multitude of applications delayed the announcement of awardees by four months but that wait is now over.

### **About Valley TeleCom Group**

Valley TeleCom Group is a local telecommunications company that provides high-speed Internet, phone and business solutions to southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico. Valley has offices in Clifton, AZ; Safford, AZ; and Willcox, AZ and have been providing services since 1962. [www.vtc.net](http://www.vtc.net)