

Request: Expand programs to provide funding for Rural Broadband Infrastructure to incentivize rural expansion projects in communities under 10,000 residents and remove artificial barriers that prevent many smaller communities from qualifying for federal grant programs.



Description: Located rurally and having under 2,000 households as a market, does not place the City of Gustine very high on the list of communities where telecommunications companies plan to expand. The City has worked with multiple providers regarding lack of adequate broadband service for its business and residents but private industry has consistently responded that the available households in the market do not support such work. Further, while the City meets population requirements for some grant opportunities, several barriers prevent the City from qualifying.

For the USDA ReConnect grants in 2020, the following factors provided barriers for the City of Gustine:

- Required that a minimum of 90% of households must not receive fixed, terrestrial broadband service of at least 10 megabits per second downstream and 1 Mbps upstream.
- Wired service from AT&T enters the City on the east side and stops, serving select areas.
- The application required just 200 of the 2,000 receive minimum service speeds to disqualify the City, using numbers for both speed and availability reported by the providers.
- The eligibility map for the grant did not reflect the reality that the vast majority of businesses and residents in the City of Gustine do not have access to the speeds listed as minimum in the grant.

To more accurately reflect the reality in communities, future grant programs can:

- Reduce service level eligibility from 90% of households to a more reasonable percentage for majority.
- Provide for independent assessment of broadband availability and speeds versus provider reporting.
- Provide incentives for providers to work with the smallest communities (under 10,000 population) where the markets are inherently not as profitable for providers.

Necessity: While the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the urgency for access to the Internet and demands on existing networks, the digital divide adversely affected small rural communities prior to the pandemic and it will continue to do so as the pandemic subsides. The pandemic simply brought to the forefront a very real problem. In Gustine, the school district parked buses around town with hotspots to try and provide access to online learning to students who had no other available access.

Before during and after the pandemic, City businesses struggle with being competitive on the digital playing field. Potential new businesses, and large employers, find lack of access problematic. Potential telecommuters remain in their cars commuting because access at home is insufficient. Students do not have the same opportunities to access learning and tools, including college research and admissions, due to the lack of access.

The pandemic not only brought to the forefront the inequity in service but it also has as its lasting legacy the movement of more and more services to online platforms. As such, the economic divide will continue to widen for small, low-income rural communities if the rural divide is not first resolved.

CONTACT:

Doug Dunford
City Manager
City of Gustine
(209)854-6471
ddunford@cityofgustine.com