



DIANA DICKINSON
pio@rogerscounty.org
Rogers County Public Information Officer
200 S. Lynn Riggs Blvd., Claremore, Oklahoma 74017

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Hybrid broadband rolls out in rural Rogers County

INOLA, Okla.- High-speed internet is officially in the homes of several residents in Ruby Estates after a long planning strategy took form early Tuesday.

Rogers County's Information Technology Director Brett Williston spearheaded the "hybrid" connectivity solution that began as a neighborly chat three years ago leading to a successful beta test, serious roundtable discussions, and approval of county officials.

"Not only did we find a way to bring reliable high-speed internet to rural Rogers County, we also found an efficient way to accomplish this," Williston said.

He noted that the digital divide between rural, urban, and suburban locations due to the exorbitant cost of connectivity creates a gap in the broadband infrastructure. Obtaining the partnership and contract with a local broadband company is now starting to close that gap.

Atlas Broadband, of Oologah, began the groundbreaking work in June by installing a tower and fiber optics - which was completed last week - enabling them to begin installing connections to residents. "It does not matter if you live in the middle of town or in the middle of 40 acres. I think in this day and age, fast and reliable internet service is a necessity," he said. "This hybrid solution will reliably deliver at minimum 150 Mbps (megabits per second) up to 1 Gbps (gigabit per second) internet service."

This ability potentially provides rural communities and different age-levels to have access to various at-home learning opportunities such as homeschool or a university, community college, trade and technical school degree or professional certification. It also provides more work-at-home opportunities.

"If we learned anything at all from the pandemic is that it taught us how to work remotely," said Rogers County Board of County Commissioners Chairman Steve Hendrix of District 2. The problem with working remote, he added, is that not everyone has access to high-speed internet or even internet at all. Most rely on cellular services which have their own set of connectivity issues.

This project raises the bar in accessibility for healthcare services for all. Allowing reliable telehealth visits with doctors or mental healthcare providers that would otherwise require travel.

Agricultural areas will now have access to oversee operations in real-time, providing farmers and ranchers a much more efficient response time to their market conditions, effectively predict needed production inputs, increase crop and animal yields, and drive more business and sustainability to their daily operations.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) response to a "call to action" task force was created to review "connectivity and technology needs" of precision agriculture across the US. This was intended to convey connectivity concepts and potential benefits to all affected by the absence of internet service in rural areas that "inhibit a greater production and profitability for small producers, stifling innovation and promoting a barrier to potential advancements in food security, food safety, and environmental sustainability."

As far as cost, the funding for the hybrid connection will be less than \$20 million to bring high-speed internet to every underserved citizen in Rogers County, currently of which there are 13,804 residents impacted.

But how much will this project cost Rogers County taxpayers?

"Absolutely nothing. Overall, this project is quite a game changer," Williston said. The funding to support the hybrid launch was \$139K. That amount is part of \$2 million that is "earmarked" from the American Rescue Plan Act.

Williston is actively searching for grants, including with the USDA, to further fund this hybrid connectivity solution.