JACKSON COUNTY:
RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INNOVATION PLAN

2020

This document was produced by the Jackson County REDI Team, in partnership with the Jackson County Board of County Commissioners.
December 2020

Please direct all questions and comments regarding this document to:

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Executive Summary

The Jackson County Board of County Commissioners is the governing body of Jackson County, Florida. With a total land area of over 955 square miles and a population hovering around 48,000, Jackson County is a rural community that takes pride in its natural resources, small towns and quiet rural way of life. Jackson County features thousands of acres of rich Florida landscape however, in the fall of 2018, Hurricane Michael devasted the area. Over the past two years the community has made steady progress to rebuild our area better than before. Jackson County chose to use this recovery process as a springboard to develop a Long-Term recovery plan for our future. As part of that, plan Jackson County recognized the dire need to address the digital divide within our community.

Jackson County has made expanding broadband infrastructure and increasing digital equity a top priority. Expanding broadband infrastructure in our community would increase access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet as well as decrease the digital divide among our citizens. Partnering with Purdue University and the University of Kentucky under the Rural Economic Development Innovation (REDI) Initiative, Jackson County has pinpointed specific areas, key goals, and objectives that will be our primary focus to accomplish this task.

The Jackson County REDI Plan outlines the need for deliberate and organized attention to identify and address gaps in adoption, utilization, and quality of service of broadband and digital services. Our plan focuses on two key areas:

- ➢ **Short and Long-Term Broadband Connectivity**

- ➢ **Digital Equity and Advocacy**

Our Community

Jackson County, Florida is quietly situated in Northwest Florida approximately one hour west of Tallahassee and one hour north of Panama City. Locals in the community boast of the beautiful natural resources including rivers, caves, and our rich history dating back to the 1600s. The County was named after Andrew Jackson, the 7th president of the United States. Marianna, the county seat, was founded by Scottish native, Robert Beveridge, and is still the home to the courthouse and other local governing organizations for the County. Jackson County is home to Chipola College and the Baptist College of Florida. Jackson County is part of a tristate community, bordering Georgia and Alabama.

Jackson County features gorgeous historic homes and spring fed rivers that are surrounded by canopy oak trees and rolling hills. Within the County there are eleven municipalities – Marianna, Greenwood, Sneads, Alford, Cottondale, Grand Ridge, Graceville, Bascom, Malone, Campbellton and Jacob City. Though thought of as a predominantly rural agricultural community, Jackson County is also known for its rich historical heritage and one-of-a-kind historical landmarks.

Like its many peer rural counties, Jackson County has faced many economic challenges including declining work-age population and the lack of local infrastructure and resources to support diverse economic and industrial development. Affected by the lack of transportation, telecommunication infrastructure, healthcare services, affordable and adequate housing, and job opportunities, Jackson County has seen its population decrease and its best and brightest leave for better opportunities. These challenges are being addressed by Jackson County through strong advocacy at the State level and aggressive pursuit of new opportunities, resources, and assets that can propel Jackson County and the Florida Panhandle into a new age of rural prosperity.

History

Jackson County was created in 1822 by the Florida Territorial Council, making it only the third county in Florida. Cotton production was the early economic driver of the County. In the early to mid-19th century plantation-style farming was dominant. As with most Southern rural communities, the Civil War and post-war reconstruction had a huge disruptive impact on the culture and economy. However, population and economic growth accelerated in the late 1800's and early 1900's with the agriculture retaining its position as the primary economic driver. With an increase in industrial and military investment in the American South following World War II, regional growth in West Florida brought expanded competition from neighboring Tallahassee, Pensacola, and Panama City that resulted in a stagnation in growth in Jackson County.

As Jackson County has moved into the 21st century, priorities have shifted toward economic and cultural diversity and participation. Currently, the primary industries for Jackson County are educational services, healthcare and social services, retail, and public administration. Jackson County land use is primarily agricultural, timber and conservation, lending to its strong standing as an agritourism, ecotourism, and nature-based tourism destination in northern Florida. With over 150,000 acres of wetlands, a popular cave system, and six springs, the county is well known for its parks and wildlife refuges. Parks like Blue Springs are part of an essential economic sector in Jackson County, bringing in tourists from all over the Region. The strong agricultural presence in the county and the availability of a wide range of products has led to the creation of local foods movements, including the grower only weekly farmers' market, which has been a pillar of the community since 1975. These local foods movements are only increasing, with the goal of making Jackson the "Local Foods County" with agricultural products grown in Jackson County identified as Locally Grown and marketed to county communities, restaurants and stores.

Since the devastation caused by Hurricane Michael in October of 2018, Jackson County has had many community organizations work to promote and improve the county with the help of local citizens. These organizations range from religious groups to economic development teams. Their goals, while focused on different sectors, are to improve the lives of the citizens of the county. Jackson County is a community that has struggled to succeed in uncertain and difficult times, both economically and environmentally.

However, with the County's many resources and an ambitious strategy for long term recovery, there is hope for future economic prosperity that will bring quality of life without the loss of the unique traditional, rural culture.

Government

The Board of County Commissioners serves as the governing body of Jackson County Government. The Commission is elected to establish policy through the adoption of ordinances and resolutions, and is responsible for placing in effect the powers conferred by the Resolution that created the Government of Jackson County; and for the promotion and protection of the safety, health, peace, security, and general welfare through ordinances, resolutions, rules, and regulations.

The Commission has the power to levy taxes and adopt budgets. It is the responsibility of the Commission to give thoughtful consideration to proposals and opportunities for the community, create and support programs and initiatives that will benefit Jackson County in the future, oversee the appropriation and use of public funds, and ensure the cost efficient and effective delivery of quality services to every citizen and entity in a fair and equitable manner.

Jackson County Board of Commissioners:

Hunter Potts – Administrative Services Director
Joey Stackowicz – Information Technology Department Director

Local Partners:

Matt White – Chipola College
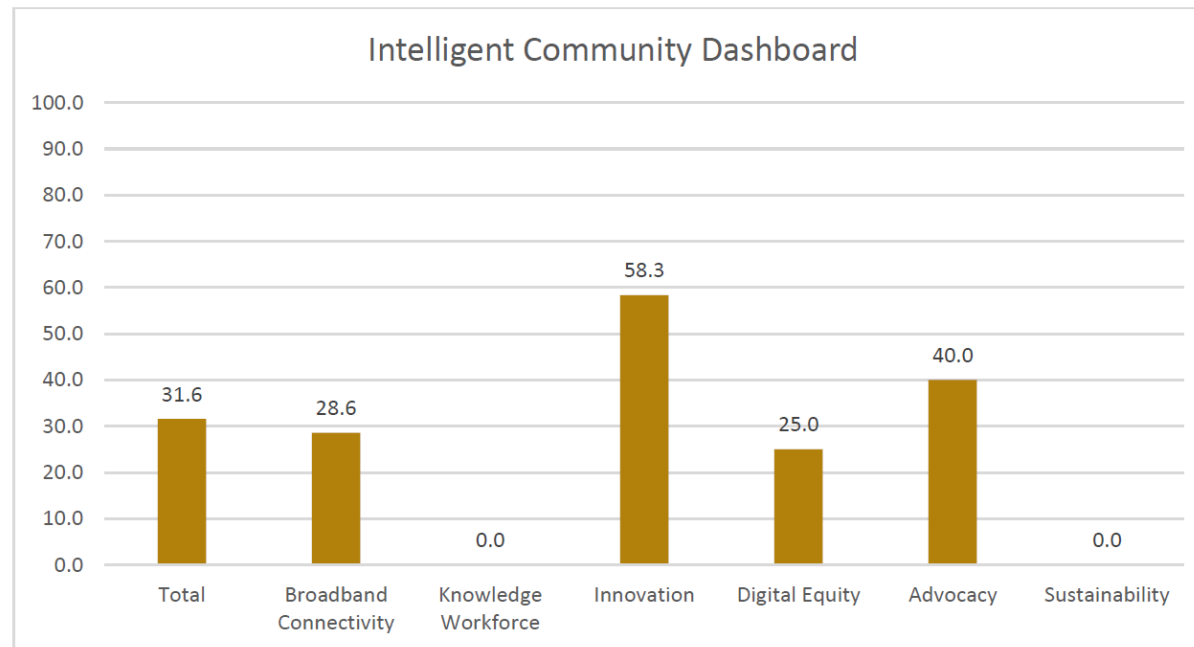**Evan McAllister** – DHM Melvin Engineering

Regional and State Partners:

Kendra Zamojski – UF/IFAS Extension Northwest District

In 2017, Jackson County's population was estimated to be 48,571, which is a 2.1% decline in population since the 2010 census. The distribution by gender is 55.4% male and 44.6% female, which is far greater than Florida's distribution of 48.9% male and 51.1% female. The median age of the Jackson County population is 41.5 years, while Florida's median age is 41.8 years. In terms of race, Jackson County has a majority population of whites at 69.3%, and a smaller, but significant population of African Americans at 27%. 79.7% of Jackson County citizens have attained a high school degree, compared with an overall percentage for the State of Florida of 87.6%. Jackson County also has an unemployment rate higher than the 4.2% average for the State of Florida at 5.1%. In 2017, 21.6% of the population lived below the poverty line, compared to 15.5% of the general Florida population.

The Intelligent Community dashboard indicates the community ranked at a 31.6 percent digital potential compared to an ideal digital-minded community. Innovation scored the highest with 58.3 percent followed by advocacy with 40 while knowledge workforce and sustainability scored zero.

Source: Intelligent Community Checklist completed by the community

2017 DIGITAL DIVIDE PROFILE

Jackson, Florida

68.43
Digital Divide Index Score

The digital divide index score (DDI) ranges between 0 and 100, where a lower score indicates a lower divide. The infrastructure adoption score and the socioeconomic (see scores and indicators below) contribute to the overall DDI. State averages are shown in parenthesis.

64.93

Infrastructure/Adoption Score

If this score is much higher than the socioeconomic score, efforts should be made to upgrade the broadband infrastructure.

46.7% (4.2%)
of people without access to fixed broadband of at least 25 Mbps down and 3 Mbps up

32.5% (16.8%)
of households with no internet access (not subscribing)

26.4% (11.9%)
of households without a computing device

25 (100)
median maximum advertised download speed in Mbps

2 (20)
median maximum advertised upload speed in Mbps

72.00

Socioeconomic Score

If this score is much higher than the infrastructure/adoption score, efforts should be made to focus on digital literacy and exposing residents to the benefits of the technology.

18.1% (19.4%)
population ages 65 and older

20.3% (12.4%)
ages 25 and older with less than a high school degree

21.6% (15.5%)
of individuals in poverty

19.8% (13.4%)
noninstitutionalized civilian population with a disability

PURDUE UNIVERSITY | Center for Regional Development | Extension

Source: FCC Form 477; 2013-2017 ACS For more information, contact Dr. Roberto Gallardo at (765) 494-7273 or robertog@purdue.edu Twitter: @robertoge or @pcrd

Jackson County was selected by the USDA's Rural Economic Development Innovation (REDI) initiative to help strengthen the capacity of our community by assisting with the development of strategic community and economic development plans. The purpose of this REDI plan is to overcome the multi-jurisdictional challenges associated with increasing broadband connectivity and increasing digital equity in our community.

This plan also serves to outline ways to better leverage federal, state, local, and/or private funding to support these endeavors. By performing an evidence-based community assessment of our community assets, challenges, and opportunities the County has, in partnership with the REDI team, developed the following goals, objectives, planning strategies and performance metrics that will help foster short and long-term solutions to accomplish this plan.

Goal - Establish Broadband Action Team

In order to address the gaps in adoption, utilization, and quality of service of broadband and digital services the County has established a broadband action team that will specifically work on solutions to our problems. This team will encourage community buy-in for the expansion of broadband infrastructure and develop policies and initiatives that will help the County facilitate long term digital equity.

Discussion and Justification of the Goal:

The County needs deliberate and organized attention to identify and address gaps in adoption, utilization, and quality of service of broadband and digital services

Objectives and Strategies:

Identify committed personnel that can establish protocols, policy, and initiatives that have community buy-in and progress adoption and utilization of broadband services

Key Assets/Partners:

- Hunter Potts - Administrative Services Director, Jackson County
- Evan McAllister - DHM Melvin Engineering
- Jackson County BOCC
- REDI Team

Strategy Evaluation Plan					
Targeted Strategies	**Lead**	**Collaborators**	**Start**	**End**	**Progress Measurements**
Outline organization structure	Hunter Potts	Jackson County	Sept. 2020	Dec. 2020	Organizational Plan, Purpose Statement, BOCC approval
Expand BAT members	BAT Team		Sept. 2020	Ongoing	Additional members, key stakeholders identified
Draft communication plan for BAT	Evan McAllister	Jackson County, REDI Team	Sept. 2020	Dec. 2020	Communications Plan

Goal - Increasing Broadband Connectivity (Short Term Focus)

In this goal the County wishes to establish a baseline for the types of service available for our citizens. To learn about existing opportunities for connecting to internet service providers and relay that information to the public. Additionally, the County will focus on creating public wi-fi access points

Discussion and Justification of the Goal:

To identify the current status of Broadband Connectivity in our region and develop short term and quick solutions

Objectives and Strategies:

To maintain and create opportunities for affordable and reliable access to high speed internet in as many areas of the county as possible to provide immediate internet access.

Key Assets/Partners:

- Matt White – Instructor, Chipola College
- Christy Andreasen – Executive Director, Jackson County Tourist Development Council
- Jim Dean – City Manager, City of Marianna
- Florida Department of Economic Opportunity
- Jackson County School Board
- Jackson County Chamber of Commerce
- Private Internet Service Providers

Strategy Evaluation Plan

Targeted Strategies	Lead	Collaborators	Start	End	Progress Measurements
Inventory providers in the region and existing availability	Matt White	BAT members	Sept. 2020	Feb. 2021	List of providers, detail of offerings
Map existing free Wi-Fi access points and hours of operation	Joey Stackowicz	BAT members	Nov. 2020	Feb. 2021	Map of existing locations
Establish public Wi-Fi access points	Hunter Potts	BAT members	Nov. 2020	Mar. 2021	Creation of new Wi-Fi access points
Map existing broadband infrastructure	Hunter Potts	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Dec. 2020	Detailed map of existing infrastructure
Row/Easement permitting review and dig once policy	Evan McAllister	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Jan. 2021	Conduct research study, Draft Policy

Goal - Advocate for Digital Equity

In our community there is a need for more people to have access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet access. In this goal the County will work to expand this message to the community by engaging with civic partners, non-profits, community leaders, local governments, and businesses.

Discussion and Justification of the Goal:

To formally show the strong need for broadband infrastructure expansion by engaging the communities, cities, and local businesses in our County

Objectives and Strategies:

To increase awareness of broadband challenges and educate the public on our options to improve

Key Assets/Partners:

- Jackson County Local Mitigation Strategy (LMS) Committee
- Christy Andreason – Executive Director, Jackson County Tourist Development Council
- Tiffany Garling – Executive Director, Jackson County Chamber of Commerce
- Jackson County Floridan (newspaper)
- Jackson County Times (newspaper)
- Jackson County BOCC

Key REDI Goals

Strategy Evaluation Plan					
Targeted Strategies	**Lead**	**Collaborators**	**Start**	**End**	**Progress Measurements**
Expand individual participation through targeted outreach	Evan McAllister	BAT members, REDI	Nov. 2020	Ongoing	Letters of support, meetings held, social media outreach, creation of webpage detailing REDI plan
Engage with community leaders and business	Matt White	BAT members, REDI	Nov. 2020	Ongoing	Letters of support (attached Appendix A), meetings held, MOUs, MOAs, Resolutions adopted (Appendix B)
Engage with Media to increase advocacy and awareness	Hunter Potts	BAT members, REDI	Nov. 2020	Ongoing	Media posts, articles published, public meetings held
Explore locations for a marker space/co-working space	Hunter Potts	BAT members, REDI	Nov. 2020	Feb. 2021	Number of Locations

Key REDI Goals

Goal - Increasing Broadband Connectivity (Long Term Focus)

The result of this goal is to see a fully integrated approach to solving our internet connectivity issues by developing a fully adaptable fiber optic broadband network that serves the entire county. Under this goal the County will need funding from outside sources to help launch this approach of developing the middle mile network.

Discussion and Justification of the Goal:

The long-term goal for the BAT is to see increased connectivity and access to reliable and affordable high speed internet.

Objectives and Strategies:

To expand broadband infrastructure in our community to allow for reliable/affordable high-speed internet access for our community.

Key Assets/Partners

- Jackson County BOCC
- Florida Department of Economic Opportunity
- Apalachee Regional Planning Council
- Jackson Count LMS Committee

Key REDI Goals

	Strategy Evaluation Plan

Targeted Strategies	Lead	Collaborators	Start	End	Progress Measurements
Outline phased approach for Middle mile network	Hunter Potts	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Jan. 2021	Construction of hotspots, construction of huts/central offices, towers, data centers
Increased connectivity for community	Matt White	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Ongoing	Number of new users, number of increased individuals with Wi-Fi access
Construction of Middle mile network	Joey Stackowicz	BAT members	Mar. 2020	Until complete	120 Mile connectivity ring established
Seek funding opportunities	Hunter Potts	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Ongoing	Grant applications, awards
Synchronize Broadband objectives with local cities	Hunter Potts	BAT members	Nov. 2020	Ongoing	Wi-fi connectivity map in downtown areas (along pedestrian and bike trails)

Key REDI Goals

Goal – Increased Adoption and Utilization of Broadband Services

Upon successful completion of increasing broadband infrastructure, the Community will have increased access to broadband. However, it will take careful planning and participation to ensure that the community is made aware of the new services and is informed on how to utilize the service.

Discussion and Justification of the Goal:

To inform the citizens of Jackson County of their options regarding broadband services in Jackson County and to provide the necessary training to be able to properly adopt the service.

Objectives and Strategies:

Inform community, measure adoption rates, ensure broadband is properly utilized.

Key Assets/Partners:

- Jackson County School Board
- Local Municipalities
- Jackson County BOCC
- Chipola College
- Opportunity Florida

Key REDI Goals

Strategy Evaluation Plan

Targeted Strategies	Lead	Collaborators	Start	End	Progress Measurements
Identify workforce development needs and develop partnerships to build capacity	Matt White	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Ongoing	Tracking list of broadband needs for businesses in our area
Develop digital training programs to build capacity	Hunter Potts	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Ongoing	Training program and/or training materials available for public use
Create comparison resource to show broadband resources and providers versus others	Joey Stackowicz	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Ongoing	Document or webpage showcasing various internet service providers

Key REDI Goals

Goal - Develop Innovative Solutions

Once the need for providing internet service and what gaps there are in broadband connectivity are fully documented the County will need to come up with in depth and practical solutions to address these needs. These solutions will feed the short- and long-term goals of increasing broadband connectivity.

Discussion and Justification of the Goal:

To know what services to provide and howe we can do that we need to know what our options are and what challenges our community is facing when it comes to obtaining broadband service

Objectives and Strategies:

Assess community, Develop innovative solutions

Key Assets/Partners:

- Jackson County School Board
- Local Municipalities
- Jackson County BOCC
- Ovid Solutions
- Jackson County Economic Development Council
- Chipola College
- Smart City Capital LLC.

Strategy Evaluation Plan					
Targeted Strategies	**Lead**	**Collaborators**	**Start**	**End**	**Progress Measurements**
Identify barriers to entry for ISPs	Joey Stackowicz	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Mar. 2021	Listing of barriers
Identify needs of community through household digital inclusiveness survey	Matt White	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Ongoing	Community meetings, survey results
Draft Middle mile network infrastructure plan	Hunter Potts	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Mar. 2021	Finalized plan, scope of work
Identify Cost	Hunter Potts	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Ongoing	Detailed cost estimate, explore alternatives
Meet with Counties like ours and see how they are addressing broadband needs	Evan McAllister	BAT members	Oct. 2020	Jan. 2021	Meetings with other Counites and cities
Explore options to increase tele-medicine and precision agriculture techniques	Hunter Potts	BAT members	Nov. 2020	Ongoing	Increased access to telehealth and precision ag. options for citizens

Acknowledgements & References

The USDA REDI Team at Purdue University & University of Kentucky

Purdue Center for Regional Development – Purdue Center for Regional Development

Bo Beaulieu, PhD –Professor of Rural and Regional Development, Purdue Center for Regional Development

Robert Gallardo, PhD – Director, Purdue Center for Regional Development

Maria Wiltse – Program Evaluator and Measurement Specialist, Purdue Center for Regional Development

Kendra Zamojski - Family and Consumer Sciences Regional Specialist

USDA Rural Development

US Census Bureau

Jackson County , FL   Est. 1822

***LETTER OF SUPPORT TO EXPAND
BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE IN
RURAL FLORIDA***

To whom it may concern,

The_____(insert organization name) located in Jackson County, Florida does hereby offer this letter to express our support for Expanding Broadband Infrastructure in Jackson County that would serve to create affordable access to reliable high-speed Internet across our community.

We believe that enhancing the local broadband infrastructure in our community will promote economic growth, enhance education systems, and improve quality of life amenities in our community and region. These advancements would allow for advanced telecommunications capability for all of our citizens and foster improvements in; GPS-based agricultural production and agricultural marketing, communication abilities for law enforcement and Emergency Medical Services personnel, telecommuting, tourism, telemedicine, distance learning (including, in particular internet access for students attending elementary, and secondary schools and classrooms) and , home-based entrepreneurship and businesses, as well as quality of life amenities during stay-at-home emergencies and normal healthy times for our community and region.

Our organization supports legislative action in both the Florida House and Senate that would create a comprehensive plan to build out broadband infrastructure in Jackson County to enable the above- mentioned activities.

We commit to honor our obligations that lie within our capabilities as leaders for economic development, training, and enhancement of quality of life features that will serve our rural community and region.

Sincerely,

Print name: _____
Title: _____

RESOLUTION NO. _____

A RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF _(Your Community)_ CERTIFYING ITS SUPPORT FOR EQUAL BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE IN RURAL FLORIDA

WHEREAS, _(Your Community)_ is concerned about the economic health and well-being of our residents; and

WHEREAS, we strongly believe in the need to be proactive and not reactive in order to maintain and create employment opportunities benefitting our citizens while still supporting the quality of life in our community and region; and

WHEREAS, enhancing the local infrastructure and workforce training will promote economic growth, competitiveness, and improve quality of life amenities in our community and region; and

WHEREAS, our community and region has endured the devastation of Hurricane Michael and is in the midst of a recovery/rebuilding process following said hurricane;

WHEREAS, our community and region has encountered and is in the midst of the pandemic disease known as COVID-19, now in the phased recovery process of said disease; and

WHEREAS, we are in need of strong financial and political support programs that allow for modern GPS-based agricultural production, telecommuting, telemedicine, distance learning, home-based entrepreneurship and businesses, as well as quality of life amenities during stay-at-home and normal healthy times for our community and region; and

WHEREAS, we support legislative action in both the Florida House and Senate that would create a comprehensive plan to build out broadband infrastructure in the state's rural communities to enable the above- mentioned domestic activities; and

WHEREAS, we commit to honor our obligations that lie within our capabilities as leaders for economic development, training, and enhancement of quality of life features that will serve our rural community and region;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT THIS BOARD DOES HEREBY RESOLVE THAT WE:

1. DO HEREBY AGREE TO SUPPORT THIS ACTION;

2. DO HEREBY AUTHORIZE OUR CHAIR TO EXECUTE THIS RESOLUTION AND ALL OTHER AUTHORIZED AGREEMENTS THAT PERTAIN TO THIS RESOLUTION

3. THIS RESOLUTION SHALL BECOME EFFECTIVE UPON ITS ADOPTION.

DONE, ADOPTED, AND PASSED by the Board of (Your Community) this _____day of____, 2020.

<div align="center">YOUR COMMUNITY</div>

ATTEST:

BY: _____

BY: _____

Public Input: Community Focus Group Sessions

Date: November 19, 2020

Time: 1:00 PM and 6:00 PM

Format: Jackson County and UF/IFAS Extension hosted two focus group sessions on November 19, 2020 to collect community input on the Jackson County Rural Economic Development Innovation action plan. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the facilitation team employed a hybrid model of in-person and virtual community participation.

Participation: Thirty-seven people attended the two focus group sessions (21 virtually; sessions. 16 in-person). Participation included representation from the Board of County Commission, local schools and students, lenders, farmers, and business community.

QUESTION 1a: Do the broadband speeds available for businesses, residents, and anchor institutions meet their current needs?

Participants agreed that current broadband access and speeds do not meet the current needs. Access is limited, broadband speeds are slow, and connections are unreliable. With children attending digital school due to the pandemic, families are travelling to business locations offering free Wi-Fi, like McDonald's and others to access the internet. With employees working remotely, employers are finding broadband speeds and connections are not adequate to meet their minimum business needs. The slow broadband speeds and unreliable connections result in lost work time or employees need to report to the office to work. Some reported using hot spots or cell service instead of wi-fi, but these services are not reliable either. Schools sent hot spot equipped buses out to communities so that students could connect to digital school sessions. Students are completing schoolwork in vehicles, some students are unable to travel to hot spots due to parents working or a lack of access to transportation. When connections are lost, work or assignments may need to be re-done and re-submitted.

QUESTION 1b: What needs for broadband do you expect into the future?

Looking ahead to the future, participants stated they would need reliable and fast broadband access. For employees to work remotely and for basic schoolwork, a minimum of 50 Mbps is needed with unlimited data options. Participants were concerned about the need for reliable broadband to retain businesses and to attract businesses in the future. One participating business owner reported just recently announcing that he is relocating his business outside of Jackson County due to the lack of

broadband in the county so that he can expand the business and increase employees. Another business owner reported having to rent a space in Panama City to work due to broadband access. The farming community has a growing need for broadband access as farming equipment becomes more high-tech and federal agencies require online paperwork. Additionally, as farms branch out into retail markets, broadband is necessary for websites and online sales. In addition to business use, the need for broadband is growing for private citizens. Fast and reliable broadband is needed for everything from schools to health care to security systems.

QUESTION 2: What prevents my community (Jackson County) from getting better broadband speeds?

Participants noted several barriers to constructing a broadband network in Jackson County. Barriers included the limited population, rural environment, and a relatively hilly geography. Participants also noted cost as a significant barrier. With a small population size and rural environment, corporations are not willing to invest the cost of installing broadband networks. Participants suggested considerations such as the possibility of the county providing broadband service and the importance of the county maintaining ownership of the broadband network.

QUESTION 3: What resources would you need to access/implement broadband?

Jackson County citizens need a resource to help them locate and compare broadband providers and plans. They need to know what free Wi-fi locations exist in the county and how and why to connect to broadband. Participants emphasized the need for considering long-term stability and reliability when constructing a broadband network. Hardwired systems are more reliable during weather related events like hurricanes, tropical storms, and thunderstorms. Participants recognized the need for an upgradeable broadband network as technology changes over time. Participants compared the construction of a broadband network to similar infrastructure systems: electricity and water/sewer. Funds are available to help build the infrastructure, but they require extensive grant applications. These grants require a cost match and technical support to submit. These factors are significant barriers to accessing funding. Participants emphasized the need for broadband access for all. Having tier pricing or subsidies might help customers to pay for the service. Supports like customer service or local staff might be needed to help customers connect the broadband equipment. Until the broadband network is established, city or county places could be set up with free wi-fi or hot spots. However, temporary public solutions like hot spots can't be used for sensitive personal data and there is a risk of data being hacked. A few participants mentioned the company Walton County contracted to run towers for broadband, however there were concerns about this system being impacted by weather.

QUESTION 4: What would you be willing/able to pay for improved broadband access?

Participants were willing to pay a fair price for reliable and fast broadband. Broadband needs to be affordable for all residents and the participants were supportive of tiered pricing or subsidies so that broadband could be accessed by all. Participants discussed that some services like satellite TV or cable could be reduced or dropped when adding broadband service. Participants compared fees for broadband to other utility services like electricity, water, and sewer.