

## **SUMMER 2021 BROADBAND PROJECT COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS SUMMARY**

**(Feza Anaise Umutoni, Zach Shunnarah, Pravesh Agarwal)**

Presented below is a summary of a series of interviews we had with president and CEO of Enterprise center, Debra Socia; Executive Director of Rhea Economic and Tourism council, John Bamber; the President and CEO of Mountain Lakes Chamber of Commerce, Rick Roden; Public Relations Director of Walker county GA, Joe Legge; and the CEO of thrive, Bridgett Massengill to get their take on broadband disparity. Each of the following interviewees were asked a series of questions in the lines of their field of work, challenges they and their constituents face, the contribution of broadband and digital competence in both causing and solving those challenges, as well as what has been and/or can be the role of both locals and officials in addressing those issues among other questions (see last page for the full list interview questions and protocol).

### **Interview 1: with Bridgett Massengill (CEO of Thrive)**

Bridgett Massengill, CEO of thrive regional partnership believes that the solutions of any problem in the region lies in the collective voices that come to the table. Particularly on the problem of broadband, Bridgett believes that broadband has been previously viewed as a luxury especially when it comes to it's limited access and the fact that it's distributors are market driven. Bridgett sees this broadband project as a great starting point to solving the gaps in distribution and she hopes that with the project the findings can go in the hands of the counties and create interventions while prioritizing counties with the biggest gaps.

### **Interview 2 : with Debra Socia (President and CEO of Enterprise Center)**

As the President and CEO of The Enterprise Center as well as a passionate techy person, Debra Socia sees lack of home internet access, digital skills training and access to devices as huge barriers to digital equity in the community. However, Debra has not lost hope. Her organization together with the local utility, the EPB(Electric Power board), the City of Chattanooga, Hamilton County, Hamilton County Schools, and local philanthropy care about equitable distribution of broadband that is fast and affordable and have

stepped up to raise over 8 million dollars to ensure that the 27,500 children who are eligible to participate in the school lunch program can have home access that is free to their family. In addition, The Enterprise Center, through their Tech Goes H0me program, provides chromebooks, digital skills training, and help to get online. They have also collaborated with 110 local organizations and trusted community leaders to encourage and involve many locals to join in on the capacity building courses provided by The Enterprise Center. Despite all these efforts and interventions, Debra believes that so much work still needs to be done. She knows that more courses could be offered, and more investment in infrastructures is necessary. The state law that limits the local utility to providing broadband only within its electric footprint limits local efforts. She believes that the more we empower local solutions, the more likely we are to have ubiquitously available high speed home internet.

**Interview 3: with John Bamber ( Executive Director of Rhea Economic and Tourism council)**

As the Executive Director of Rhea Economic and Tourism Council, when asked the issues he and his constituency face in their work, John Bamber responded that there is a lot. Some he mentioned include inability to apply for certain grants, problems with communication and trust, and a lack of labor force. Broadband specific issues he mentioned were the fact that fewer people are relocating in the county because some areas don't have broadband access yet most people want to live in places with access. This is partly due to the fact that ISP has a limited footprint. In the long run, the county suffers a lack of labor. With the Thrive broadband project in progress, John hopes that the next steps could be to use the generated data and concisely create a presentation that can be shown to officials and develop an understanding of the impacts of broadband on small and big businesses as well as be used to help convince ISP's to expand their infrastructure.

#### **Interview 4: with Rick Roden (President/CEO of Mountain Lakes Chamber of Commerce)**

Though the most pressing issue in his county right now seems to be less broadband focused and more labor force related, Rick Roden still sees broadband accessibility as a necessity to the community and in his work. On a regular basis, Rick's responsibility revolves around public policy and constant communication with elected officials via zoom and several email exchanges as well as updates on websites. Rick also thinks broadband proved to be more useful to the community especially in the pandemic when children continued to engage academically remotely. But again, his main challenge in his work and his focus in the interview was more his concern regarding the level of unemployment and lack of labor force being ironically created by the stimulus checks provided by the government. Apparently, most employees in his county are finding it easy to quit their current jobs so as to receive government funding which surpasses their regular paycheck. However, Rick did mention that as of June 16th, the state of Alabama removed the extra unemployment benefits. This is most likely to help more people get back to work and perhaps solve the lack of labor force.

#### **Interview 5: with Joe Legge (Public Relations Director of Walker county GA)**

In his work behind the scenes tackling government affairs, in addition to his actual title as public relations director of Walker county, Joe Legge considers a lack of access to government information by locals as a pressing challenge. As someone whose work involves constant communication on websites, social media and other digital platforms with his constituents, he attributes the aforementioned challenge to a lack of internet access, digital literacy and devices especially in the lower end (rural areas) of the county. Joe acknowledges that the state of Georgia has redrawn the access footprints, and internet providers such as Chickamauga Telephone Corp and Ringgold Telephone Company have broadened their access umbrellas, some school buses and the three public libraries in the county have internet accessible in parking lots which has enabled people to access internet without entering buildings. However, Joe stills believes that broadband is a specialized topic that could use a project manager in each community, or consultant to help use the various entities together to create a uniform.

### Quotes to feature:

“We really don’t have a good idea of the problem itself which is why we need to find a place and sit down and look for guidance” (**Anonymous**)

“There is no business or industry that doesn’t need broadband” (**Rick Roden**)

“Change state laws and engage locals to solve local problems” (**Debra Socia**)

“Broadband is seen as a luxury and not as a necessity, it will be helpful if it was treated as a utility just like electricity or water” (**Joe Legge**)

“Thrive has helped Dayton to find its identity.” (**John Bamber**)

“We need to be thinking on a regional level on how we are solving these problems” (**Debra Socia**)

“Without broadband you will be up the creek without a paddle” (**Rick Roden**)

“Because broadband is as important if not more so as the road with drive on” (**Bridgett Massengill**)

"The truth is, it’s difficult to get a grasp on the internet struggles of a rural community. Lack of access is generally due to one of two things: geographical (infrastructure) limitations, or socioeconomic struggles. We hope to be able to leverage resources so that neither of these continue to be a barrier to broadband access into the future." (**John Bamber**)

### Interview questions asked protocol:

Interviewer(s) started the interview with an introduction and gently asked for consent to quote their interviewees, assured complete confidentiality and anonymity for any provocative or controversial comments and then Jumped into questions!! Each interview lasted in the vicinity of 15 to 20 minutes.

- Can you please tell us more about what you do/your work.
- What are the most pressing challenges facing your constituency and/or your organization?
- How important is internet access in addressing those challenges?
- Are there digital strategies you use to reach your audience or constituency (i.e. a website [is it mobile-friendly?], social media, an app, etc.)
- Are there any factors that prevent your constituency from engaging with you digitally? (i.e. lack of home internet, lack of device, language barriers, lack of technology training, etc.)
- What do you need as an organization to overcome barriers related to internet challenges? (i.e. staffing, funding, technological expertise, devices, etc.)
- If the internet was not a barrier or an issue at all, and if you had the resources, what opportunities would you seize as an organization? What about your constituency?
- What strategies (if any) are in place in your community to address the digital divide? Do you feel that they are effective?
- How important is local leadership in your community in addressing the digital divide?
- As you may already know, Thrive regional partnership is working on the broadband access project. Say by the end of this project, we successfully figure out locations which have gaps in broadband access, what do you think could be the next step forward?
- Do you have any questions for us?