REQUEST FOR INTEREST (RFI)
For High-Speed Internet/Broadband Services

Date Issued: August 12, 2021

Submissions must be received no later than 2:00 PM on September 13, 2021

Mail submissions to:
Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments
PO Box 9
Wilson, NC 27894
Attn: Ben Farmer, Partnership RFI

Hand-delivered submissions will not be accepted. This includes UPS/FedEx deliveries due to the UCPCOG offices being locked and inconsistently staffed. Electronic and postal submissions only will be accepted. Direct electronic submissions to: BFarmer@ucpcog.org.

INQUIRIES: All inquiries or questions must be directed to Ben Farmer at BFarmer@ucpcog.org. If a clarification or change to the RFI is required, a written addendum will be posted on this page. Respondents are responsible for keeping up with all RFI updates.

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Note: This is not a request for proposals.
I. Purpose

Northampton County Government, the Town of Lasker, the Town of Rich Square, and the Town of Woodland are partnering with technical assistance provided by the Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments (hereafter referred to as the “partnership”) to release this Request for Interest (“RFI”) to service providers of high-speed internet/broadband services (“internet service providers” or “ISP”) to gather concepts, ideas, and interest from service providers of high-speed internet/broadband services providing affordable, reliable high-speed internet access for residential, business, and government customers throughout the focus area defined in Section II, Figure 01.

The partnership seeks ideas and interest from ISPs on providing high-speed internet/broadband service to underserved or unserved geographic locations within the focus area. High-speed internet/broadband service can include, but is not limited to, the deployment of a fiber-to-the-premises (FTTP) solution, fixed wireless solution, or some other type of last-mile solution. Interested parties should provide information on how their services meet or exceed the FCC’s broadband benchmark speeds of 25 megabits per second (Mbs) download and 3 Mbs upload speeds (https://apps.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-331760A1.pdf) or provide information as to how its advertised speeds meet or exceed the broadband speed guide provided by the FCC (https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/guides/broadband-speed-guide).

The partnership was formed as a part of the Upper Coastal Plain Council of Government’s EDA-funded regional broadband initiative and is one of many steps member governments are taking to assist unserved and underserved areas gain access to high-speed internet throughout the focus area and beyond. No public funds have been or will be spent to develop, release, or administer this RFI. Additionally, none of the partnership members are granting any funds to selected ISPs or seeking to establish a public-private partnership for internet deployment. This RFI is intended to outline the market opportunities, gauge potential interest, and invite interested providers to submit their ideas for new or expanded service throughout the focus area. This process is also intended to inform municipal and county leaders of what steps can and should be undertaken to incentivize broadband deployment across the focus area which are allowable under North Carolina law.

Note: The partnership welcomes responses to this RFI from ALL interested or potentially interested parties. Since this is only to solicit preliminary interest and ideas, this RFI should not be interpreted as an invitation for bids or request for proposals. For the purposes of this RFI, the terms “respondents,” “providers,” and “vendors” refer to entities submitting written responses to this RFI.
II. The Focus Area

(a) Geography and Development:

The focus area is in southeastern Northampton County and includes the Towns of Lasker, Rich Square, and Woodland. The Town of Jackson, the Northampton County seat, is approximately 3.5 miles west of the focus area. The Town of Scotland Neck in Halifax County is approximately 9 miles southwest, the Town of Lewistown-Woodville in Bertie County is approximately 10 miles southeast, the Town of Ahoskie in Hertford County is approximately 10 miles east, the Town of Murfreesboro in Hertford County is approximately 6.5 miles northeast, and the Virginia border is approximately 12 miles north of the focus area, with the Northampton County Towns of Conway and Severn between. The three towns within the focus area (Lasker, Rich Square, and Woodland) consist of residential, commercial, agricultural, and industrial development. The unincorporated area within the focus area largely consists of residential and agricultural development. The named unincorporated areas within the focus area include George and Potecasi. US Highway 258 passes through the focus area including the central business districts of Rich Square and Woodland. NC Highways 561, 305, 308, and 35 also pass through the focus area.
(b) Demographics and Economy:

According to Esri population forecasts, 41.6% of the focus area population are over age 55 and 21.9% are age 19 or under. 58.5% of the focus area population are black alone, 36.3% white alone, and 3.4% are of Hispanic origin (any race). Of the focus area population over the age of 25, 44.2% attained a high school diploma or alternative credential as the highest level of education, with 7.6% attaining an associate degree, 11.7% a bachelor's degree, and 6% a graduate or professional degree. An estimated 89% of the focus area population over the age of 16 are participating in the labor force, 51.9% of whom are in white collar occupations, 27.3% in blue collar occupations, and 20.9% in service occupations. The most common industries include services (36.2%), manufacturing (20.5%), retail trade (17.1%), transportation/utilities (4.6%) and agriculture/mining (3.9%). As of May 2021, the Northampton County unemployment rate was 5.5%, 1% higher than the North Carolina unemployment rate and 0.3% lower than the national unemployment rate.

(c) Households:

There are approximately 1,983 housing units within the focus area. 65.9% are households with 2 or more people and 34.4% are households with 1 person. 26.6% are households with children and 5.8% are multigenerational households. The average household size is 2.98. 51.3% of housing units are owner occupied, 26.4% are renter occupied, and 17.5% are vacant.

The unincorporated community of Potecasi, on the northern end of the focus area, has a pizza shop, a post office, an assisted living community, several churches, and a concentration of residential development. Potecasi is approximately 2 miles from Woodland.
(d) Existing Broadband Connectivity:
Current broadband internet providers within the focus area include but are not limited to CenturyLink Communications, Hughes Network Systems, Mediacom Communications, Roanoke Connect, and Viasat, Inc. According to 50 responses collected from the focus area to the NC Broadband Infrastructure Office’s NC Broadband Survey [https://www.ncbroadband.gov/north-carolina-broadband-survey], which was released in mid-2020, 39 respondents were considered unserved (less than 25Mbps download and 3Mbps upload), 6 were inconclusive (had an internet connection but did not record speed test data), and 5 were served (had an internet connection with greater than 25/3 speeds).

Figure 03 - Lasker Area NC Broadband Survey Responses

Figure 04 – Rich Square Area NC Broadband Survey Responses
Based on 227 NC Broadband Survey responses collected from Northampton County households, business, and farms, 89 had no wireline internet and 14 reported having no internet at all. Additionally, 90 of those with internet are paying over $81 per month for internet service only. The median download speed for Northampton County respondents was 10Mbps (below the 25Mbps threshold) and the median upload speed was 2Mbps (below the 3Mbps threshold). Note: on the maps above, served locations took a speed test when responding and were over the 25/3 threshold and unserved locations had no internet or were below the 25/3 threshold. To view the full, interactive NC Broadband Survey data map (produced by UCPCOG), click here [https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=17-5KdolZHzzj0_M6DCTK4l9oz-Enjb4Z&usp=sharing].

(e) Anchor Institutions:

In order to represent a potential customer base with the focus area, the Partnership has developed an online map, hosted by the Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments, that labels the locations of private businesses, public institutions, churches, and schools. The map can be viewed at this link: https://arcg.is/1ujHaT0. Most of the assets represented on the map are located within the municipal boundaries of Lasker, Rich Square, or Woodland, however, there are many operating farms and occupied residences in the middle of the focus area in between and surrounding the three municipalities.

Notable potential anchor institutions within the focus area, in addition to the high concentration of farms, include Northeast Academy Christian and Valley Pine Country Club in Lasker, Rich Square Market and the future Roanoke Chowan Community College satellite campus in Rich Square, Newsome Oil & Gas Company and the Grapevine Café in Woodland, the more than 10 churches and more than 10 public facilities across the focus area, and the nearby Tri-County Airport in Aulander (less than half a mile from the focus area in Bertie County).
(f) Potentially Available Assets

The partnership may provide an ISP with access to assets, services, and infrastructure to the extent available and needed by the ISP for the purpose of providing high-speed internet connectivity within the focus area. Use of any public asset by an ISP will be reviewed by local government attorneys prior to development of agreements. Available infrastructure may include use of water, sewer, storm water, or street rights-of-ways, available land or easements, space on or within public buildings, space on water towers or other vertical assets, and more. The partnership will work together and with other organizations as necessary to facilitate utilization of existing resources needed in order to connect the focus area to high-speed broadband by an ISP.

The map linked on the previous page also includes the locations of two water towers operated by the Town of Rich Square in Rich Square, one water tower operated by Northampton County in Lasker, and one water tower operated by the Town of Woodland in Woodland. Additionally, the location of two private communication towers, one south of Rich Square and another between Woodland and Potecasi, are included on the map. Not presented on the map, but potentially relevant to the expansion of high-speed broadband throughout the focus area, include the nearby MCNC fiber trunk that passes through Jackson, the water, wastewater, and stormwater rights of ways maintained by the three municipal governments (Lasker does not operate a water or wastewater system), the focus area’s municipal-operated street networks, electric poles and transmission rights of ways (not local government operated), and sites zoned for and/or actively seeking new residential or commercial development.

Pictured left: Town of Rich Square’s southern water tank viewed from the parking lot of the planned Roanoke Chowan Community College Satellite Campus. The Town of Rich Square operated the water tower and owns the future satellite campus.

Pictured right: Northampton County’s water tower viewed from the center of Lasker. Dick’s General Store is to the right of this viewpoint and Northeast Academy Christian is a few hundred feet in the other direction, across the street from Lasker Town Hall.
III. Requested Information

(a) Cover Sheet

Provide the full legal name of the organization or Provider, and the type of entity.

Provide a website link and physical address.

The names of all principals of the Provider must be disclosed on the cover sheet; specifically, all persons who have an equity interest in the Provider organization and/or hold a senior leadership position in the Provider organization.

The cover sheet must be signed by an owner, corporate officer, or agent authorized by the Provider.

(b) Previous Experience

Identify previous experience in providing internet services and broadband content in other markets.

Provide a map of your current coverage area in relation to the focus area.

Describe services and content offered to existing customers, including pricing and contract terms.

Provider customer service capabilities and technical support practices, including service standards.

Identify three references (names, email, and phone number) who are familiar with your previous experience as a service provider.

(c) Preliminary proposal for internet service and broadband content you would offer in the focus area

Provide a preliminary description of internet service and broadband content you may consider offering in this focus area (include existing and/or proposed download and upload speeds)

What customer segments would you serve?

What services and content would you offer to various customer segments, including critical or key pricing and contract terms?

What customer service and technical support would you offer?

How and where would you staff this?

What service standards would you provide?

What specific area of the region are you considering serving?

(d) Other information, advice, or counsel you would offer to the partnership with respect to high-speed internet/broadband expansion.

IV. AREAS OF COOPERATION

To the extent not covered in previous responses, this section highlights ways that the Partnership could cooperate with respondents to improve the business case for proposed solutions. We encourage respondents to be creative and suggest other types of partnerships or business opportunities of interest.

Specifically, this section could include:
Resources and facilities:
Explanation of need for access to community assets and resources. Respondents should also address the relative importance and impact of variations in terms of more flexibility with respect to accessing the following types of community assets, facilities, and policies:

Pole Attachments
Utility conduits
Dark fiber
Backhaul or ISP partnerships involving local, statewide or regional fiber assets
Public rights of way
Undergrounding policies
Other community assets, facilities (including radio towers) or policies not specifically mentioned above.

Regulatory environment:
Description of any rules or regulations at the federal, state or local level that could impact the feasibility or underlying economics associated with the proposed solutions. Responses should also include an explanation of any forms of proposed regulatory relief, including streamlined permitting, which could improve the economic case for the business models or network solutions proposed or for other network solutions that respondents considered but dismissed due to existing regulations and their effect on economic viability of such proposal.

Contracting issues:
Explanation of any material considerations or expectations that respondents have with respect to any of the following issues likely to be negotiated during any future Requests for Proposals:

Intellectual property
Insurance
Indemnities
Warranties
Dispute resolution
problems with current providers, if any
Other contracting issues not specifically listed above

Other partnership or revenue opportunities:
Discussion of any other types of partnerships or working relationships between respondents and supporters which could improve the business case for respondents to partner with one or more supporters. For example, a company may work with community colleges and the surrounding communities to develop partnerships that allow the company to deliver voice, video and data services, and/or to pilot cutting-edge new products, recruit new employees, or enter branding and marketing agreements.
V. Review Process

Responses received by the stated deadline will be shared with all members of the partnership including Northampton County Government, the Town of Lasker, the Town of Rich Square, and the Town of Woodland. A member of the partnership or a combination of partnership members may seek further information from a responding ISP upon reviewing submissions. All partnership members reserve the right to reject, or otherwise not respond to, any or all submissions.

Confidentiality

All submissions are subject to North Carolina Public Records Law. To the extent that respondents desire to submit proprietary information, all three partnership local governments and the Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments represent that they will use all reasonable efforts to claim available exemptions under the NC Public Records Law (NCPL), and will notify the affected respondent if an NCPL request is received in connection with that proprietary information. The respondent will be given an opportunity to seek court action to prevent release of information. All materials that the respondent believes are proprietary MUST be labeled “CONFIDENTIAL” or “TRADE SECRET.” Members of the Partnership cannot guarantee that their efforts to claim available exemptions will be successful and any of them may be required to disclose the respondent’s information, even that which is labeled proprietary, privileged and/or confidential.

Incurred Costs

No member of the Partnership, including the Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments, will be liable in any way for any costs incurred by respondents in replying to this RFI, including, but not limited to, costs associated with preparing the response or participating in any site visits, demonstrations, conferences or oral presentations.

Pre-proposal Meeting:

To provide an opportunity to discuss the focus area's broadband needs and opportunities in further details, members of the partnership invite all interested respondents to meet virtually on Thursday, August 26 at 11AM.

Contact Ben Farmer at BFarmer@ucpcog.org to receive the full meeting invitation.

Links:

UCPCOG Broadband Webpage, where information about this RFI will be published and up to date:
https://www.ucpcog.org/planning_and_development/broadband.php

UCPCOG map of NC Broadband Survey responses, with the focus area highlighted:

Map of the focus area’s anchor institutions and vertical assets:
https://arcg.is/1ujHaT0
# ATTACHMENT A: COVER SHEET

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Person, Business or Organization:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Entity:</strong> (e.g. Sole-Proprietorship, Partnership, Corp., Non-Profit, Public Agency)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal Tax ID Number:</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact Person – Name</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Contact Person – Phone Number (s)</td>
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<td>Contact Person – e-mail address</td>
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By signing this **Cover Sheet** I hereby attest: that I have read and understood all the terms listed in the RFI and I have read and understood all terms listed in this request.

___________________________________  _______________________________________
Signature of Authorized Representative Printed Name of Authorized Representative

___________________________________  _______________________________________
Date Printed Title of Authorized Representative
ATTACHMENT B: POPULATION DENSITY

This is a Dot Density Map displaying population totals from American Community Survey on a Census Tract level.