Request For Proposals
Broadband Strategic Plan for Rural Seneca County
September 23, 2021

1.   Basic Information

RFP Issue Date: Sept. 23, 2021
Proposal Due Date: October 25, 2021
Eligibility: Consultants with experience and expertise in developing broadband strategic plans.
Issuer: Tiffin-Seneca Economic Partnership (TSEP)
Address: 96 S. Washington St., Tiffin, OH 44883

We seek a firm that has demonstrated success in developing broadband strategic plans for counties and/or for rural areas. Experience in effectively working with larger groups of collaborative partners is important.

2.   Executive Summary

Seneca County recognizes the importance of providing robust broadband infrastructure for both its economic and community development efforts. The Broadband Strategic Plan is intended to identify specific actions and projects that the County may support to best promote the deployment of broadband infrastructure throughout rural Seneca County and its townships and villages.

This Request for Proposals ("RFP") is for the development of a Broadband Strategic Plan for rural Seneca County, Ohio ("County"). The creation of the RFP and management of the RFP process will be conducted by the Tiffin-Seneca Economic Partnership, which functions as the County's economic development agent. If and when a consultant is selected, the North Central Ohio Regional Council of Governments (NCORcog) will manage the contract. Once the plan has been completed and adopted, its implementation will be managed and overseen by the Seneca Regional Planning Commission.

3.   Background Information

With a population of approximately 55,000 people, Seneca County is located in northwest Ohio, with US Route 224 running east-west through the middle and US Route 23 running north-south on the county's west side. The City of Tiffin, the county seat located in the middle of the county, has about 18,000 residents, and the city of Fostoria, located on the western border, has approximately 13,000 residents. The remainder of the county is rural, with six villages, fifteen townships, and six public K12 school districts with more than 8,000 students.

Over the past several years, Seneca County has enjoyed significant economic growth, placing fourth in the country last year out of 581 micropolitans (non-metro counties with significant population) for large economic development projects. Seneca County was one of the few counties in Ohio that ended 2020 with positive net revenue, local government has strong, innovative leaders and teams that approach things in a collaborative and strategic manner.

Broadband access is an increasingly important factor in advancing the economic development of a community, by lowering business costs, improving productivity, attracting businesses, retaining highly skilled residents, and improving economic vitality. Ready access to broadband also promotes community goals related to education, quality of life, and operational efficiency of local government.

Elected officials, school officials, and residents are strongly behind expanding broadband access in rural Seneca County. Adams Township Trustee Bill Frankart expressed the overall sentiment well with this statement: "I am writing this letter to you as a parent, Adams Township Trustee, and a business owner in Adams Township in Seneca County. I strongly support the broadband initiative that is being introduced in Seneca County. We have numerous spots where there is sporadic at best reception for internet services. There is an upswing on remote learning from local school districts to colleges and it makes it tough on students to keep up with classroom activities with slow and sporadic upload speeds. In the rural county area, there is more Mom and Pop business being established and relying more on internet for their production and marketing of their product. I am looking forward to collaboratively working with all stakeholders in the county to bring broadband to the whole county."

Insofar as high-speed broadband service is not currently available throughout all of rural Seneca County, the County's long-term goal is full deployment of broadband Internet service throughout all of the county's townships and villages to promote the economic development and well-being of the Seneca County community. In rural Seneca County, some of the current and future providers of broadband include, but are not limited to, AT&T, Bascom Communications, Charter Communications (Spectrum), Sycamore Telephone, North Central Electric, and AEP Ohio. See Appendix for more information on some of our providers.

In March 2017, NCORcog, together with the City of Tiffin and Seneca County Commissioners, explored doing a broadband assessment and strategic plan in conjunction with the development of fiber infrastructure for key Tiffin area public facilities (e.g., the Seneca County Justice Center). Although one proposal was received, the project did not move forward at that time. Although a third-party broadband assessment has not been conducted, there are providers that have broadband and fiber surveys, as well as detailed mapping that would be available to the selected consultant.

4.   Project Description
This Request for Proposals is seeking professional services to develop a Broadband Strategic Plan to guide the County's efforts to speed up the deployment of broadband Internet service throughout rural Seneca County.

4.1   Objectives
More specifically, the County expects the Strategic Plan to achieve the following objectives:
- Identify broadband infrastructure currently in place within Seneca County.
- Identify gaps in the existing broadband infrastructure within Seneca County.
- Identify assets within Seneca County that can facilitate the deployment of broadband infrastructure within Seneca County.
- Recommend policies and actions to improve broadband infrastructure, maximize utilization of existing broadband infrastructure, determine future funding needs, evaluate options to obtain funding, and identify any other actions available to facilitate the deployment of broadband infrastructure within Seneca County.

- Establish a target and metric for successful broadband deployment, which may include Internet connection speeds, coverage areas, and/or other items developed by the preparer of the Strategic Plan.
- Recommend actions and policies to facilitate 5G deployment throughout Seneca County.

The Tiffin-Seneca Economic Partnership (TSEP) created a Rural Broadband Task Force (RBTF) to work with TSEP staff to help develop the RFP and evaluate proposals. The RBTF is made up of representatives of the Seneca County Commissioners, local government and school districts, the North Central Ohio Regional Council of Governments, the Seneca Regional Planning Commission, private providers of broadband services, and other county stakeholders.

4.2 Key Issues and Areas of Concern
The Strategic Plan also needs to address the following key issues and areas of concern:

4.2.1 Affordability, Adoption & Digital Equity
These issues should be taken into account when developing a broadband strategic plan. One should not just assume "If you build it, they will come."

4.2.2 Definitions & Technology
The rural broadband strategic plan should thoughtfully consider, define, and use definitions of key terms. What, for example, is exactly meant by broadband? It is more complex than simply using the definition of the Federal Communications Commission that defines high-speed broadband as download speeds of up to 25 megabits per second and upload speeds of up to 3 megabits per second (25/3 Mbps). Additionally, careful thought should also be given to the different types of technology currently being used or being developed for broadband, including digital subscriber lines (DSL), cable, fiber, wireless, satellite, and broadband over powerlines (BPL).

4.2.3 Infrastructure Assistance & Funding
If it were possible to expedite the permit process for easements and right of ways this could be helpful. Various funding sources need to be inventoried, evaluated and considered (e.g. ARPA, NTIA, and USDA funding), when developing an accurate picture of the funding landscape and in developing and making any recommendations about potential new local funding programs. Different and innovative public/private partnerships should be considered and suggested. If a grant program were developed, then there should be eligibility requirements, e.g., facilities-based broadband providers applying for funding should be required to file a 477 with the Federal Communications Commission.

4.2.4 Maps & Coverage
It is important to have accurate service and fiber maps from providers when considering funding and supporting infrastructure expansion. FCC 477 maps, for example, can be problematic; e.g., if a provider serves, one customer in a census block, it is considered "covered" for purposes of the 477 maps. Furthermore, it is understood that these maps, as well as information about current and future buildouts, may be considered proprietary

If making recommendations for any grant program development, it should be considered whether or not to require providers to provide accurate street-level mapping and the ability to serve 100 percent of a census

block with proposed technology and speeds. Fiber maps are one type of maps which show the true capabilities of providers. DSL speeds are dependent on whether their nodes are fiber- or copper-fed. This must also be taken into account.

4.2.5 Speed Test Data
Any existing or new speed test data must be evaluated critically to ensure accuracy. Speed tests may not take into account the type of package consumers are subscribing to, the motivation for taking a test, dependance on consumer devices, public servers, and the amount of bandwidth not being used.

5. Scope of Work
The Scope of Work at a minimum should include the following tasks, which are intended to meet the objectives described above:
- Kick-Off Meeting: Complete a kick-off meeting with NCORcog, TSEP, and the Rural Broadband Task Force (RBTF) to discuss project objectives, goals, and tasks; share information already held by members of the RBTF, such as existing infrastructure and existing facilities with strong broadband service; and share existing County policies related to broadband.
- Inventory of Existing Providers and Fiber-Optic Paths: Identify current broadband service providers operating in the County and the locations of existing fiber-optic infrastructure in the County.
- Gap Analysis: Identify areas in the County that are well-served, underserved, and unserved. By showing where the gaps are in existing broadband infrastructure on a macro level, such an analysis will enable the County to focus its resources in areas where broadband deployment is most needed. Include a parent-teacher survey as part of the data collection methodology.
- Asset Inventory: Identify the County's current assets that may be utilized to promote broadband deployment, such as streetlights and existing conduit. This inventory can then be used to identify some of the tools available to the County in accomplishing its broadband objectives. Conversely, identifying the absence of some sort of asset or asset class may lead to recommendations to acquire that asset or asset class.
- Plan for Engagement of Broadband Providers: Develop a strategy to engage owners/operators of existing fiber-optic and broadband infrastructure in the County to encourage them to deploy service throughout the County.
- Identification of Obstacles: Identify obstacles to broadband deployment in the County. This may include physical, legal, regulatory, financial, and other obstacles. Identifying obstacles to broadband infrastructure will help advise the Seneca County Commissioners and other local governments as they decide how to best promote broadband deployment throughout the County.
- Identify Funding Sources: Identify potential ways the City can obtain and use funding for its broadband initiatives.

While TSEP and the Rural Broadband Task Force have identified the above tasks to be a part of the development of the Broadband Strategic Plan, respondents to this Request for Proposals should develop a plan of work they believe will most effectively meet the County's objectives outlined above.

6. Required Proposal Information
Both the Technical Proposal and the Cost Proposal are to be submitted together.

6.1   Technical Proposal
- Cover Letter: This letter should introduce your firm and team and should be limited to two (2) pages.
- Statement of Qualifications: Include a statement of your firm's qualifications to perform the work associated with broadband-related studies and strategic planning. The statement should include information describing three (3) completed projects of a similar size and complexity finished within the past five (5) years. Provide client contact personnel and telephone numbers for each project. Similar material should be provided for each sub-consultant participating in the project. This material should be limited to three (3) pages.
- Organization and Staffing: Include an organizational chart showing your firm's project management team and their organizational relationship. Provide resumes for the project team, including a resume for the Project Manager and for each proposed sub-consultant, if applicable. Each resume should be no more than one (1) page in length.
- Scope of Work: Provide a scope of work that describes task-by-task how you plan to accomplish the required work, which may vary from task list included above. Said scope should include tasks for review of work products by TSEP and NCORcog. Effort should be made to keep the length of this section to under three (3) pages.
- Project Schedule: Provide a timeline that shows the planned starting time and duration of each task in your scope of work.

6.2   Cost Proposal
- Cover Letter: This letter should point out any conditions which could affect your firm's costs.
- Cost of Services: Provide a table that shows your firm's estimated cost for the services, listed by task.
- Extra Work: Provide any other cost factors which you would need to price extra work.

Please note that NCORcog has space available for lease at a nominal fee for the selected firm to work on the study locally, if desired.

7.   Proposal Evaluation Criteria
The Rural Broadband Task Force intends to evaluate and rank the technical proposals received by utilizing the following criteria:
- Qualifications of the Firm: Based on experience and projects similar to this project.
- References: Based on quality of references.
- Staffing: Based on background and experience of proposed staffing on similar projects with the proposing firm.
- Schedule: Based on thoroughness and reasonableness of the proposed schedule.
- Scope of Work: Based on the understanding of work, approach, methods, procedures, etc.

The proposal submitted by each firm will be ranked using the criteria described above. The highest ranked firm(s) will be interviewed by the Rural Broadband Task Force. The ranking may be adjusted subsequent to the completion of the interview(s).

Neither TSEP, NCORcog, nor any other participant of the Rural Broadband Task Force is bound to select any of the firms submitting proposals, and is not liable for any costs of preparation and submittal of proposals, including any presentations made to the Rural Broadband Task Force.

8. **General Information**
   - TSEP reserves the right to reject any and all submittals.
   - The Consultant shall provide TSEP with any exceptions, additions, or suggestions that will aide in the selection process.
   - The proposal and this RFP shall jointly become part of the Agreement for Professional Services for this project when said agreement is fully executed by the Consultant and NCORcog.
   - Consultant is obligated to provide evidence of insurance liability as outlined in Exhibit A to the Agreement, which is Attachment 1 to this RFP.
   - Subcontractors/subconsultants (subcontractors): The Proposer may utilize the services of subcontractors on those parts of the work which, under normal contracting practices, are performed by specialty subcontractors. Unless a specific subcontractor is listed by the Proposer, Proposer is representing to TSEP that Proposer has all appropriate licenses, certifications, and registrations to perform the work hereunder. The proposer shall be fully responsible to the County for the performance of his/her subcontractors, and of persons either directly or indirectly employed by them.

Nothing contained herein shall create any contractual relation between any subcontractor and the County.

The following is the County's tentative schedule for selection of the Consultant:
   - Issuance of RFP: September 13, 2021
   - Deadline for RFP Submittal: October 18, 2021
   - Completion of Review of Qualifications & Proposals: November 1, 2021
   - Consultant Interviews (if Necessary): November 1-14, 2021
   - Selection of Consultant: November 30, 2021

Two (2) hard copies and an electronic copy (or access to an electronic copy) of each proposal must be received by 4:30 p.m. on October 18, 2021 at the following physical and email address:

Tiffin-Seneca Economic Partnership
96 S. Washington St., Suite A
Tiffin, Ohio 44883
Attn: Corrina Haynes, Operations Manager
haynes@tiffinseneca.org

If there are questions about the RFP, please contact David Zak, President & CEO of TSEP, at the following:
zak@tiffinseneca.org
419.912.1150 (cell)

Appendix A
Description of current Broadband/Internet Service Providers
Information provided by each provider.

A1.   AT&T
AT&T is proud to connect customers across the country by continuing to grow the nation's best network. From 2018-2020, we expanded coverage and improved connectivity in more communities by investing nearly $350 million in our wireless and wireline networks in Northern Ohio.

AT&T markets its 100% fiber network to more than 14.5 million customer locations. In 2021, we are increasing our fiber footprint by 2.5 million customer locations across more than 90 metro areas that we currently serve, including Cleveland market. We also recently announced that AT&T will invest $2 billion over the next 3 years to help address the digital divide nationwide.

AT&T has consistently provided innovative, reliable, high-quality products and services and excellent customer care to the residents and businesses of Ohio. Our mission is to connect people with their world, where they live and work, and do it better than anyone else. We are focused on enhancing our network with more advanced, higher speed technologies like fiber and wireless, which consumers are demanding. AT&T is helping bridge the digital divide through private investment to expand and upgrade networks, new product offerings, and support of policy solutions. These steps help customers gain access to greater educational, employment and healthcare opportunities.

In Seneca County AT&T currently has copper services in the following wire centers - Tiffin (TFFNOH44), New Riegel (NWRGOH59) and a large portion of Fostoria (FSTAOH43). We do not have any (FTTP) Fiber to the premise service in these wire centers and only Tiffin has (FTTN) Fiber To The Node.

A2.   Bascom Communications
Bascom Communications is a progressive cooperative voice, data, and video service provider that has been headquartered and operating locally in Seneca County since 1906. Bascom has invested millions into providing fiber to the premise services to businesses and residential customers alike since 2003 and continually building that network out ever since. We have been providing symmetrical Gigabit offerings to all fiber subscribers since 2018. Bascom was the largest RDOF awardee in Seneca County in the last auction and will be building out to homes and businesses in Adams, Big Spring, Bloom, Clinton, Eden, Hopewell, Liberty, Loudon, Pleasant, Scipio, and Seneca Townships beginning this year. Bascom also operates a fixed wireless Internet operation to help fill in gaps in areas that have no service and uses it for prospecting new areas for fiber expansion as we feel that is the end goal.

A3.   Charter Communications
Charter Communications is a leading connectivity company providing superior products and services through its Spectrum brand and investing in the infrastructure, technology, and people powering the future. Charter is at the intersection of technology and entertainment, facilitating communications that connect more than 31 million residential and business customers in 41 states. Charter's commitment to serving customers and exceeding their expectations is the bedrock of Spectrum's business strategy and the philosophy that guides more than 96,000 employees.

Spectrum is currently the second largest broadband provider in the United States and largest broadband provider in Ohio. In Seneca County, Spectrum currently provides Gig speed broadband service to the municipalities of Tiffin, Fostoria, Attica, Bettsville, Bloomville, Green Springs, New Riegel and Republic in addition to portions of Adams, Big Spring, Bloom, Clinton, Eden, Hopewell, Jackson, Liberty, Loudon, Pleasant, Reed, Scipio, Seneca, Thompson and Venice Townships.

The company has achieved growth through innovation and acquisitions of cable properties, most recently completing transactions with Time Warner Cable and Bright House Networks. U.S. News and World Report recently named Spectrum Internet as the "Best Internet Service Provider for Rural Areas," and Spectrum's commitment to service quality has resulted in Multichannel News naming Spectrum as Operator of the Year for 2020. Spectrum's unparalleled commitment to service quality was especially evident in response to the pandemic. Charter's network continued to perform well despite higher levels of peak bandwidth usage. Charter accomplished all this while making adjustments as to how and where employees worked in response to COVID protocols.

Charter is proud of the internet speeds it is able to deliver over its network, and in the latest FCC "Measuring Broadband America" report, Charter consistently offered as good as or better than advertised download and upload speeds, both during peak times and as an overall average.

Charter has invested nearly $40 billion in infrastructure and technology over the last five years as part of its long-term commitment to expanding broadband access across urban, suburban, and rural areas to connect more Americans. From 2018-2020 alone, Charter extended its network to reach an additional 2.5 million new homes and businesses, about a third in rural areas. Charter has recently announced a $5 billion initiative to connect more than a million currently-unserved, mostly rural families and small businesses to reliable broadband service with speeds of up to 1 gigabit per second, including adding significant resources to its construction department focused solely on adding nearly 115,000 miles of new network infrastructure to its more than 750,000 existing miles. Charter also plans to hire more than 2,000 employees and contractors to support the expansion, with many of those employees based in Ohio. A portion of that rural broadband expansion will take place in Pleasant Township in Seneca County.

Rural broadband expansion by Charter uses the same network deployment and operational procedures currently successfully employed across the country. These practices include documented and thoroughly tested methods of managing network performance, managing service issues at a network or customer level, and coordinating change management with minimal or no disruption to customers. Charter delivers all of its services over a state-of-the-art network and Charter backs them up with professional customer service and support from local technicians. Charter is dedicated to bringing its clients innovative, reliable services, and responsible care.

Spectrum has also worked with governments across the country on joint projects targeted at broadband expansion. Spectrum therefore has extensive experience with managing and completing projects of the sort contemplated by the application, and has been awarded projects exceeding $50 million in grant support in recent years, many of which it has already completed.

In addition to national resources, Charter is able to draw upon the experience and capabilities of its regional and local personnel in Northwest Ohio. Charter (and its predecessor companies) has been providing

broadband internet service in Ohio for more than 24 years. Charter, through its Spectrum brand, currently serves more than 1,740 communities in Ohio, and provides broadband internet, video and voice service to more than 2.7 million customers in the state, operating more than 76,000 miles of plant. Notably, some recent broadband expansion projects have include areas of Athens, Clark, Fairfield, Fayette, Meigs, Pickaway, Pike, Ross and Scioto Counties in Ohio.

A4.   Sycamore Telephone Company
Sycamore Telephone Company (STC) is a prominent provider of internet, video, and phone in portions of Seneca, Wyandot, and Crawford counties. Locally owned and operated, STC is universally recognized for outstanding customer service and unwavering support of the communities we serve. STC's commitment to expanding broadband in rural Ohio is steadfast as expansion of our fiber network continues on an daily basis.