

https://newsadvance.com/community/new_era_progress/news/as-some-residents-wait-amherst-county-works-to-fill-gaps-in-broadband-service/article_a3bc519c-ce7d-563e-b1f4-660f074f3543.html

As some residents wait, Amherst County works to fill gaps in broadband service

Justin Faulconer

Dec 9, 2020



A fiber-optic cable is pulled through a hole drilled underground in Amherst on Tuesday, Dec. 1, 2020. The cable will allow rural residents to have high-speed access to the internet.

Kendall Warner/The News & Advance/

In nearly two decades of living at her current home in Amherst County, Monica Dean said her massive struggles with affordable high-speed internet access make her feel like she and her husband have been left behind.

The retired couple lives in the Bobwhite Road area of the county, where the internet is slow, unreliable and costly when it's even working, she said, and they've dealt with high cellphone bills.

"If I had known about these problems when I moved here, we would not be living in Amherst County today," Dean said. "I feel like the entire county has been left behind and its children are going to suffer because of it."

County officials are working to resolve online woes of residents and businesses through a broadband expansion effort with partnering companies to have all homes covered with reliable service.

While areas of Madison Heights and the town of Amherst are covered, county officials have said many rural areas outside of those urban hubs are underserved or unserved and the goal is to fill in those gaps. The county in 2019 began allowing use of public safety towers for a local company to cover more homes and a portion of federal stimulus money to deal with many effects of the coronavirus pandemic has been geared toward broadband upgrades.

County Administrator Dean Rodgers said \$1.8 million is currently obligated with Firefly Fiber Broadband, a subsidiary of Central Virginia Electric Cooperative, to install fiber-optic cable in the Gladstone, Temperance and Boxwood Farm areas. That work is set for completion before the end of the year as part of a deadline for spending the federal money.

The county is also pursuing more than \$1 million in grants to further extend fiber in rural areas and install some 60-foot-tall towers, Rodgers said. If those grants are received, the county could bid out more expansion work in March 2021, he said.

The Amherst County Public Schools system also has committed \$450,000 of its federal aid money toward the efforts.

"We want to keep going toward fiber and not wireless to the extent we can," Rodgers said.

The county's department of community development is tracking data to map out where the broadband infrastructure is needed, which will be shared with companies in submitting bids for bridging the gaps, Rodgers said. A Bedford County-based company has expressed interest in crossing into the county from Big Island and providing service on the Virginia 130 corridor, he said.

The Virginia 130 corridor and connecting Buffalo Springs Turnpike to U.S. 60 West, as well as serving rural communities such as Pleasant View, Lowesville and Elon, are target areas for the county.

Rob Arnold, superintendent for Amherst County's schools, has said the Amherst Remote Academy, which launched this semester to give families and students a remote, online source of education in place of traditional in-person learning, is the division's largest school this year in terms of enrollment. The large movement this year to increased online learning and residents working from home have made the push for countywide broadband expansion more crucial than ever, officials have said in comparing it to electrification of rural areas in the 1930s.

Arnold said while online learning is useful for many families during the pandemic, he feels children are best served around other students and caring adults face to face with safety measures to protect against the coronavirus.

Dean said she couldn't imagine how families with poor internet access or none at all are dealing with at-home learning. She feels it is among the county's top three priorities.

"Whatever way gets it done expediently is the way to go," Dean said. "Children in Amherst County will never catch up if we don't do something about this now."

She lives less than two miles from the U.S. 29 Bypass and said she is envious of other rural communities she's been to with similar topography that are better served.

"It's depressing," Dean said. "It's frustrating to not have what other counties have."

She said her husband, who years ago had to rent an office to work professionally because of lack of service at home, has spoken extensively with the county about their issues.

“We’re still waiting,” Dean said. “All I care about is high-speed internet at an affordable rate. I don’t care how they get it here.”

Rodgers recently said the countywide broadband build-out effort may take several years and it remains a top priority. The two big drawbacks of living in a rural area are lack of internet and hauling trash, he said.

The county is working to make each of those challenges much more convenient for residents, including adding more solid waste convenience center locations, he said.

“I think we’ll change the character of the county,” Rodgers said of the county’s strides. “There will be more people who want to live here.”

Correction

Monica Dean has lived at her current home in Amherst County almost 20 years and in the county for 32 years. The story has been updated to include that information.

https://newsadvance.com/new_era_progress/news/striving-for-a-cleaner-amherst-new-coalition-forms-to-tackle-countys-trash-problem-head-on/article_e70131d7-f73d-547a-9514-a41f9bb1dfbe.html

Striving for a cleaner Amherst: New coalition forms to tackle county's trash problem head on

Justin Faulconer
Apr 8, 2020



In this March 2018 file photo, Amherst County High School students volunteer to pick up trash on a trail at Riveredge Park in Madison Heights.

Lee Luther Jr.

Driving on Virginia 130 and other corridors in Amherst County, Virginia Myers said trash on the side of roadways has made it abundantly clear the county has a problem.

Myers, who grew up in the county, is among a small group of citizens rolling up their sleeves to do something about it by getting involved in the recently formed Coalition for a Cleaner County.

While not seeking the limelight of a leadership role, she said the group's main goal is gaining traction to spread more interest in exploring various ways to reduce litter in the county. "I just felt like something needed to be done about it," the 1998 graduate of Amherst County High School said of joining the group.

Myers said in her opinion litter has gotten worse in recent years. A passionate supporter of the environment who picked up trash with her local Girl Scout group on Virginia 130 and has regularly recycled, she feels the constant presence of trash is not a good look for her home county and fears property values could suffer.

"It's just such an eyesore," Myers said. "I feel the natural beauty of Amherst is one of the biggest assets we have as residents of the county. If we let trash take over, it's not good for anybody. I think it's something that could benefit everyone if we get a handle on it."

With the Amherst County Board of Supervisors' blessing, County Administrator Dean Rodgers commissioned the group to tackle the litter issue. Members include representatives from Rodgers' office, the Amherst County Sheriff's Office, county departments of community development and public works, the Amherst County Economic Development Authority and the Virginia Department of Transportation.

The coalition, which already has held two recent meetings, will work on setting up cleanup days and brainstorming ways to encourage community involvement, according to the county.

Myers said the group is meeting every two weeks and actively looking for more participants in the movement to rid the county of litter. While the coalition works to get its feet on the ground and more organized, she said reaching out to businesses and community stakeholders about possibly adopting highways is a goal.

Another priority is setting up a system to let the coalition know about areas and spots in the county that need attention as far as litter pickup. The group is hoping to get started soon with planning strategies, and the idea is to eventually have regular monthly gatherings.

Myers said she's been in touch with the board of supervisors about the initiative to clean up the county. "Being viewed as a priority helps give it weight," she said of the group's mission.

Tucker said she feels Myers is the right person to chair the new group and her passion will inspire others to join. Establishing the coalition is a seed of change for the county, she said.

"This initiative is indicative of how serious we are about cleaning up Amherst County," Tucker said. "Citizens are starting to notice and the feedback has been phenomenal."

Rodgers said the coalition consists of people, organizations and agencies that care about the appearance of the county's roadways. Local government has limited resources and relies on citizen assistance in many ways, according to Rodgers. A reason the Amherst County Fair has been such a success in the past few years, he said, is because of all the citizens and local businesses' support that poured in to help make it happen.

"This Coalition will be a similar success as we all ramp up to pull together and restore the natural beauty of Amherst County's byways," Rodgers said in an email.

Myers said the plan is for the group to tackle major roadways and side roads. "Driving on back roads, you see [litter] also, which to me is even sadder because that's where the true natural beauty of our county is," Myers said.

She's spoken with multiple county residents who are interested in finding ways to produce a cleaner Amherst.

"There definitely are people who are interested in making sure this is a success, which is great," Myers said.

Reach Justin Faulconer at (434) 385-5551.

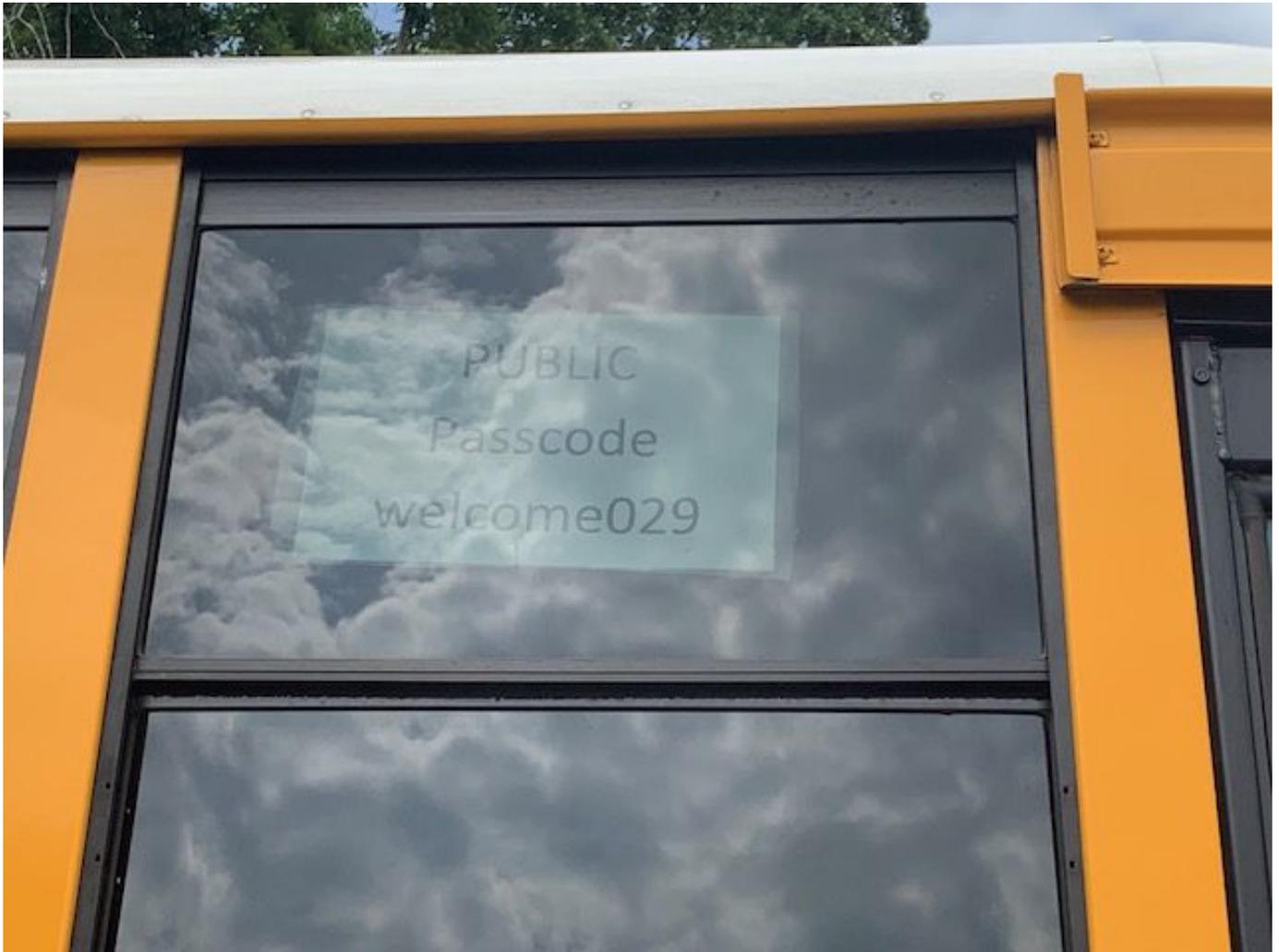
Reach Justin Faulconer at (434) 385-5551.

https://newsadvance.com/new_era_progress/news/amhersts-broadband-needs-come-into-focus-during-pandemic/article_7f9e22d0-f1d1-557e-82b9-44eda5c90be8.html

Amherst's broadband needs come into focus during pandemic

Justin Faulconer

Jun 24, 2020



A code for residents to use WiFi from a bus parked in the Amherst Church of God lot on U.S. 60 East in Amherst County is visible from the window. The Amherst school system has made many of its schools' grounds available to the public for high-speed internet access, along with buses in several locations throughout the county.

Justin Faulconer

The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted the local economy; shattered the normal flow of gatherings, activities and events; and caused many to struggle to make ends meet.

In the onslaught of negative effects the virus has brought to everyday life in Amherst County, a common feeling among local officials and residents has reverberated crystal clear: reliable, high-speed Internet service is vital now more than ever.

Nine months before the coronavirus was declared a pandemic in the United States, Amherst County Board of Supervisors members Claudia Tucker and Jimmy Ayers in late June stood atop Tobacco Row Mountain celebrating the first of a string of towers coming online to boost broadband coverage in rural areas.

Tucker, the board's chair, said at the June 2019 ribbon-cutting the occasion represented a banner day for the county in its mission to boost broadband outreach through a partnership with SCS Broadband. To date, the Nelson County-based company has placed equipment on a handful of public safety towers across the county and was set to begin the final two when COVID-19 hit, County Administrator Dean Rodgers said in a recent virtual chat with Amherst County Chamber of Commerce leaders.

The transmitters needed to complete the project that aims to bring about 90% of the county up to speed on receiving broadband coverage, are from China and has caused a delay, Rodgers said.

"It is a priority," Rodgers said of the push for broadband. "It has always been a priority. It's just a matter of figuring out how we're going to do it."

The CARES Act, a federal relief package Congress passed, has generated more than \$2 million for Amherst County to use under certain conditions to respond to COVID-19. Rodgers said \$1 million of that money is going toward broadband expansion in Amherst County and Amherst County Public Schools also is planning to use its share of federal stimulus money, just more than \$820,000, toward its goal of bringing internet access to the homes of every student in Amherst regardless of where they live.

Amherst Schools Superintendent Rob Arnold said during the county school board's June 11 meeting a major challenge with distance learning, which is positioned to become a major component of education in the 2020-21 school year, is high-speed

broadband.

The division is working with Lit Communities, a company with national outreach, to expand broadband capabilities.

“The end goal is to provide hard-wired Internet access to our families regardless of where they live in the county,” a June 3 post on the Amherst school division’s official Facebook page said.

The schools are providing directory information to Lit Communities to create a map of the county to identify what options currently are available to families and areas currently underserved with Internet access.

“They are putting their arms around all our assets and finding ways to finance it,” Arnold recently told the Amherst County School Board.

While the efforts would benefit the entire county, Arnold said Lit Communities’ No. 1 goal is to meet students’ internet needs this upcoming school year.

School board member Ginger Burg expressed excitement on the expansion initiative, describing how she was cut off some during a June 4 virtual town hall, which according to Arnold drew 400 participants, because of online connection issues.

Amanda Wright, a school board member who lives in the Temperance area, said she appreciates the division picking up the baton on the county’s Internet problem “which I have suffered through for 22 years.”

“I am so happy there may be some forward movement on that because I live on the fringe of society and would like to have good Internet,” Wright said at the board’s June 11 meeting.

Rodgers said the county is looking to help the division in its efforts and is looking at ideal locations for towers, monopoles and fiber, as well as “dead spots” where the infrastructure could reach.

“If you’re in the shadow of a mountain, you’re not going to get service,” Rodgers said, adding installing towers and monopoles are ways to fill in those spots.

The \$1 million from the county’s share of the federal stimulus for broadband expansion also is aimed at helping many residents teleworking during the pandemic, he said. The county is moving swiftly, he added.

“We can’t cut a check until the goods are received,” Rodgers said. “... We don’t want to lose any of this funding.”

Technology is one of six focus areas an Amherst schools’ task force is focusing on with planning efforts underway to reopen schools in what Arnold said will be much a different scenario for public education than when students last were in school in the second week of March. The school board is set to receive a presentation of the return plan at its July 9 meeting and will tackle it further during a July 20 retreat session.

The division also is using its bus fleet to get broadband service to rural areas. Assistant Superintendent William Wells said a piece of WiFi equipment on buses extends the service of a hotspot or aircard around the bus for approximately 200 feet.

“If people need Internet connectivity they can pull up to one of the buses we will have staged in the community and access it,” Wells said.

The division has buses at Amherst Church of God on U.S. 60 East near Gladstone and New Prospect Baptist Church in the Pleasant View area and is working to put some at Scott Zion Baptist Church in Madison Heights, the Coolwell Recreation Center and the Pedlar Rescue and Fire station the Forks of Buffalo area. School officials also are trying to get a bus with the equipment to a location in Old Town Madison Heights, Wells said.

Arnold said social distancing will be a major challenge for the schools and some models have been reviewed at rotating times for students to come in. Six-foot separations in classes typically with 22 students will mean smaller class sizes when students physically are present and the 6-foot rule also must be adhered to on school

buses. Students on buses would sit in every other seat, though siblings can sit together, and the division anticipates fewer bus riders and a spike in car ridership, according to Arnold.

The school system also must be prepared to give families who don't want to return their children to school for safety reasons an online option, which he told the school board Virtual Virginia will assist in.

Gov. Ralph Northam on April 13 announced a dramatic expansion of Virtual Virginia, the Virginia Department of Education's existing online learning system, to allow every teacher in the state to host virtual classes. Virtual Virginia content can be loaded onto devices for use by students in homes without sufficient internet access to support online learning, according to Northam's announcement.

From telehealth to education, broadband is critical in allowing Amherst County residents to enjoy the same quality of life as more populated areas, Tucker said of using the stimulus money for expanding coverage.

"The students of Amherst missed almost three months of school. Some students had the ability to learn virtually because of access to the Internet but many did not," Tucker said. "The inequality that presents is unacceptable; broadband is not a 'nice to have,' its a must have. Whether it's towers on schools or equipping our school buses ... we have to pursue every avenue available and using this funding will help us get there."

Reach Faulconer at (434) 385-5551.

Reach Justin Faulconer at (434) 385-5551.