

Nebraska Capital Projects Fund

Digital Inclusion Plan on behalf of Joint Applicant Hartman Telephone Exchanges, Inc./BWTelcom Long Distance, Inc. (BWTelcom) Village of Lebanon Project Attachment J

GOAL STATEMENT OR VISION STATEMENT

Hartman Telephone Exchanges, Inc. (D.B.A. BWTelcom) is a rural broadband service provider in Southwest Nebraska. BWTelcom has been owned by the Raile Family since 2004, along with the Benkelman Telephone Co., Inc. and the Wauneta Telephone Company. Our footprint across Southwest Nebraska covers 1,366 square miles.

BWTelcom prides itself on its dedication to our communities and neighbors. Our goal is to provide the same services to our communities that they might see in larger cities or towns. We have set out to deliver fiber-fed broadband to each of our customers. We want to make sure no one is left behind because of a digital divide.

Lebanon is a very small community. Many of the individuals that live within the village commute to other areas for employment, education, and healthcare opportunities. High-speed broadband would enable these individuals to gain access to more of these opportunities right at home. The COVID 19 pandemic has created an even greater need for the Village of Lebanon to have access to fast, reliable broadband. We have seen a shift in the number of people working from home, as well as the number of students who are homeschooled. It is also important for people to have access to healthcare opportunities, such as telehealth visits. In a very rural community such as Lebanon, it is even more important for people to have access to these services, as there is not a medical facility within the village itself.

It is our hope that bringing fast, reliable Internet to the people of Lebanon will provide them greater opportunities in all facets.

BROADBAND AVAILABILITY

COMPUTER AND INTERNET USE	RED WILLOW COUNTY, NEBRASKA	NEBRASKA
Households with a computer, percent, 2016-2020	91.0%	91.5%
Households with a broadband internet subscription, percent, 2016-2020	80.8%	85.6%

source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/redwillowcountynebraska>

As you can see above, Red Willow County, Nebraska falls behind the State average as far as number of households with a broadband internet subscription. This is partially due to a slightly higher poverty level in the County (see chart below), as well as insufficient availability. In the Hartman exchange territory, all customers have access to fiber-fed service, except for the Village of Lebanon. The 54 customers that live there are fed by old copper lines via VDSL technology. They do receive 25/3 service but are not capable of reaching 100/20 speeds.

In our fiber-fed areas, we offer speeds from 25/3 to 1 Gig. We want to bring fiber to these customers, not only for possible new opportunities, but to make sure the community will not fall behind because of a digital divide. We will be offering these customers the same choices that we offer all other fiber-fed BWTelcom customers.

BROADBAND AFFORDABILITY

Broadband access in Nebraska is generally affordable where available. Customers can expect to pay around \$600 per year for a service that will meet most of their needs. As you can see below, the Village of Lebanon, located in Red Willow County, Nebraska, has a slightly higher rate of poverty than the State’s average.

INCOME & POVERTY	RED WILLOW COUNTY, NEBRASKA	NEBRASKA
Median household income (in 2020 dollars), 2016-2020	48,140	63,015
Per Capita income in past 12 months (in 2020 dollars), 2016-2020	28,395	33,205
Persons in poverty, percent	9.5%	9.2%

source: <https://census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/redwillowcountynebraska>

Looking at the estimated percentage of homes at poverty level in Lebanon, roughly 5 homes would struggle with the added cost of paying for broadband services.

BWTelcom participates in both the Lifeline and ACP programs, and we actively advertise the availability of these programs to our service areas. We will assist any customer in applying for Lifeline and/or ACP discounts to assure that they can get a service that fits their needs, as well as their budget.

MARKETING & OUTREACH

Hartman Telephone Exchanges, Inc. has served the Village of Lebanon for many years. During this time, we have worked to establish positive relationships with members of the community through various avenues, including open-house events to meet face-to-face with our customers and discuss product/service offerings.

Letters seeking community feedback regarding the fiber deployment project in the Village of Lebanon were mailed out to a few long-term members of the Lebanon community on February 17th, 2023. These letters included handouts detailing the Internet packages that would be available once fiber is deployed.

Before construction begins, Hartman Telephone Exchanges, Inc. will issue a letter to all households within the community notifying them that crews will be burying fiber in the area. A packet will be included with this letter that contains an educational piece about fiber technology, pricing for services that will be available, information about the Lifeline and ACP programs and contact information/sign-up instructions. A notification of construction will also be published in the local newspaper.

After the fiber is buried, Hartman Telephone staff will conduct follow-up outreach campaigns in the form of phone calls and direct mailings to market our fiber services to the Village of Lebanon.