



## **MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Snohomish County Council

**FROM:** Kara Main-Hester, Chief Recovery & Resilience Officer; Jason Biermann, Senior Policy Advisor

**DATE:** July 18, 2023

**RE:** 2023 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Broadband Spending Plan

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### **Background**

Snohomish County Council appropriated \$10 million of the County's ARPA CLFR funds to expand broadband access throughout the county. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the crucial need for county-wide, reliable high-speed internet. Online schooling, telehealth and remote work are basic needs that cannot be fulfilled without reliable connections.

To develop a proposal to address these needs, the Broadband Task Force was formed and is comprised of Council and Executive staff. This team has examined the County's broadband needs as part of a nation-wide effort to direct billions of dollars in federal funding to the areas most in need. While basic access to broadband is important, true digital equity should be considered. Digital equity includes ensuring that people have both access to digital services and the ability to adopt digital services. In Snohomish County's rural areas, broadband access continues to be the primary concern. Often, the only service available is highly expensive and of poor quality.

The ARPA funding plan centers digital equity and attempts to balance both high-quality access with adoption of services that already exists.

This memo is meant to satisfy the ARPA Spending Plan required by the 2023 Adopted Budget Condition No. 3. County Council must approve the spending plan by motion.

### **Proposed ARPA Programming**

**Broadband Enhancement Study - \$300,000:** Starting earlier this year, the County initiated an extensive broadband gap analysis and strategic plan with a contracted consulting firm. This work will be completed in early 2024 and will provide detailed analysis of current broadband service across the county. The plan will also examine barriers to digital equity, conduct community outreach and engagement, determine likely funding mechanisms for expanded broadband services and will identify new federal funding opportunities.

A second phase of this study will include detailed integration of broadband capabilities and opportunities that will be integrated into the County's own data and made available to the public in a more user-friendly non-technical format.

**Digital Equity Programs - \$1.5 million:** The Broadband Task Force recommends a proposal from Sno-Isle Libraries to expand the capacity of their loanable computer with hot spots by 750 devices. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the loanable hot spot program has had three requests for every set of equipment. By expanding this capacity, the County can increase adoption of broadband services that are already available for households that may not have their own devices or service plans.

The task force also recommends expanding the digital navigator program. Digital navigators help library patrons connect to the internet, troubleshoot tech issues, learn about online safety and get signed up for the Affordable Connectivity Program, a federal discount broadband program for income-qualified households.

**Broadband Access Programs - \$8.2 million:** The task force recommends that the remainder of the funding be utilized for broadband access projects throughout Snohomish County including the necessary staffing, monitoring and professional services for the projects to be successful within the period of performance.

In late 2022 Snohomish County applied for funding availability from the Washington State Broadband Office (WSBO). Five projects were submitted and completed a rigorous, ARPA CLFR-compliant vetting process. The total available from WSBO was approximately \$120 million and they received applications totaling over \$300 million; unfortunately, although eligible, WSBO did not select any of the County's projects for State funding. The County's own ARPA CLFR funding can be used for these projects. It is recommended that the County consider prioritizing projects that benefit the greatest number of Community Anchor Institutions as these locations, by definition, dramatically expand the service to an area and can have large benefits for public safety, emergency management and community connectedness.

Additionally, this funding could support local matching requirements for other grant-funded programs that increase broadband access to underserved communities such as the SR530 broadband project.

The Office of Recovery and Resilience recommends that all \$10 million of ARPA CLFR be spent in the categories outlined in this funding plan but flexibility in the dollar amounts across the categories be authorized. Estimated funding may change as outreach continues and programmatic costs are further refined.

## Timeline

Given the urgency of need in the community and ARPA's compressed timeline, the County's intention is to contract with providers by the end of 2023. Expenditures and outcomes associated with all investments will be available through quarterly U.S. Treasury reporting and a public transparency dashboard ORR has developed in partnership with County departments.