Executive Summary

Next Level Application
WATCH Southeastern

This project is for a broadband wireless network to be built and operated by Watch Communications (WATCH). This Next Level Connections project will serve 8,603 unserved households, 489 unserved businesses, and 19 unserved anchor institutions in Decatur, Bartholomew, Jennings, Ripley, Union, Fayette, and Rush. In a funding partnership with the State of Indiana and WATCH will improve unserved levels to 25Mbps up and 3Mbps down by August 31, 2021. Deploying a wireless last-mile network connected by a Fiber and Wireless middle mile will provide enhanced Internet services to residences, small business, municipals, farms and nonprofits. It will also improve for students, teleworkers and healthcare professionals. It will also enable medical patients gain access to telemedicine services. These factors in addition to creating a cascading benefit to the local and regional economy. Total eligible project cost is $6,259,939. Total grant request is $4,945,352. Applicant match is $1,314,587.

The network will cover the unserved areas within the counties listed above located in non-contiguous eligible census blocks. These areas are determined eligible by comparison to FCC 477 data used to create the Next Level Connections (NLC) eligibility map. Please refer to Attachment 1.4-project-map.kmz for project area map.

In the spirit of closing the digital divide, Watch is applying for NLC grant funding to continue that pursuit. The project is focused on providing high speed bandwidth via “fixed wireless” utilizing licensed, unlicensed spectrum and TV Whitespace. The advantage that we have is clear; we have an existing network in or near many of the NLC designated census blocks that will allow us to leverage existing assets and resources. The result is simple; a swift go-to-market deployment, reliable network performance and satisfied subscribers. The second, and most important result, will be the return on the investment for the State of Indiana. By leveraging the existing network, assets and resources of Watch Communications, the ROI is achieved by utilizing a lower investment in infrastructure while achieving higher results in advanced services, subscription adoption and a sustainable business model.

The project utilizes the existing WATCH network for transport and leverages their existing operational assets. WATCH has wireless assets in or near many of the eligible areas, which only require upgrades to electronics in order to meet service demands. Remaining unserved passings will be served by adding new wireless assets to the WATCH wireless network capable of at least 25/3mbps.

Eligible service areas will be connected to the WATCH core network through its backhaul (middle mile) network. Middle mile transport will be comprised of both wireless and fiber backhaul with a mixture of existing upgrades and new construction. New and existing towers will be used to provide wireless coverage. WATCH’s wireless equipment upgrades are highly scalable and able to achieve much higher broadband speeds to certain areas than the proposed 25/3Mbps offered in this application.

WATCH is a comprehensive service provider that encompasses marketing, sales, field services, customer service, technical support, tower services, construction services and full management services. This provides a comprehensive and well-rounded business model that will continue to support its client base; residential and commercial. WATCH has managed fiber and wireless networks since 1992, so they are well versed in operating networks in this area. WATCH has recently added staff and is already prepared to operate and maintain this additional network. Strategic partnerships, such as in engineering, construction and support will provide WATCH the platform to remain scalable and profitable. Leveraging CAF II, recurring revenue and capital on hand, the project will remain an integral part of the over-all strategy.
WATCH, through its Public Private Partnership (P3) model has approached the market in over 35 counties in Indiana alone. Upon completion of our CAF II expansion, we will service over 45 counties and thousands of subscribers, both residential and commercial. The objective is to obtain collaboration with the county stakeholders; commissioners, councils, economic development groups, REMCs, hospital systems, school corporations, major employers and the public in general. Through this collaboration, WATCH will continue to improve and expand its reach while providing advanced services via fixed wireless and fiber optics.

WATCH has identified this project as an unserved area. The importance of this has been raised by many community leaders in the attached support documents. WATCH has identified need through service requests from local residents and businesses. Many legislators, businesses, and anchor institutions have expressed their need for better service with letters of support from businesses, residents, committees, council members and county commissioners. Access to high-speed broadband would improve the quality of life in several different ways. It will provide new growth opportunities for businesses, allowing them to do business on a larger scale, as well as contributing greatly to helping maintain existing businesses. New businesses are attracted to areas that have access to high speed Internet, which allows for increased efficiency. Better broadband will also allow more access to healthcare, education, and employment via telecommuting. Although several towns do have some level of broadband service, there are a large number of smaller towns and rural residents that have been left behind. This puts them at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to education and their ability to complete school work. Higher education via distance learning will also become a better option with better broadband. Residents will also enjoy more entertainment opportunities, and better access to financial management tools and social media. Using these tools has become increasingly important in rural areas because it reduces the need to travel, saving customers time and money. WATCH has already had great success with their wireless and fiber optic networks in providing these services to residents and business in and out of their home exchange. By receiving this grant, WATCH will be able to provide better long term service to more customers in the eligible areas proposed in this application.

Awarding Next Level Connections Broadband Grant