



## Memo

To: Kris A. Knochelmann, Kenton County Judge/Executive  
Dr. Jon Draud, Kenton County Commissioner  
Joe Nienaber, Kenton County Commissioner  
Beth Sewell, Kenton County Commissioner  
Stacy Tapke, County Attorney

From: Joe Shriver, County Administrator  
John M. Stanton, Director of External Affairs

Date: April 9, 2021

Re: RFQ for Kenton County Broadband Expansion

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that accessible and affordable broadband is necessary to education, healthcare, and employment. According to service providers in the region, in Boone, Campbell, and Kenton counties, there are approximately 58,700 addressed locations not currently receiving the FCC definition for high speed broadband. Providing connections to these unserved areas is vital to the region's future.

To address this issue, Boone, Campbell, and Kenton counties issued a Request for Qualifications on September 22, 2020, with the goal of evaluating the qualifications of interested broadband providers to identify the best-situated entity to expand high-speed broadband to unserved and underserved areas of the counties. Four responses were received.

At the point of receiving the proposals, Campbell and Kenton counties paused due to lack of immediate funding, while Boone County proceeded and ultimately contracted with Cincinnati Bell.

Due to the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act, Kenton County is now in a position to proceed with developing broadband infrastructure to:

- \* Establish telemedicine capabilities;
- \* Facilitate distance learning; and
- \* Improve telework capabilities for employees.

Unlike a Request for Proposals, the Request for Qualifications is intended to outline the project goals and ask respondents to provide a response that demonstrates their ability to design, implement, and complete a project meeting the stated goals. Specific performance requirements, timeline, budget, and guidelines are negotiated once the recommended candidate is identified and authorization to negotiate is affirmed by the Fiscal Court.

Boone County executed a very thorough evaluation of the four proposals submitted, before concluding that Cincinnati Bell was the preferred vendor. A copy of the Boone County evaluation is attached.

Kenton County's evaluation team conducted an independent desktop review of the four proposals, and concurred in the conclusions reached by Boone County. In particular, Kenton notes the following components as critical:

- \* The requirement of no up-front capital, but rather a pay-as-built system;
- \* Achieving 1 gig service;
- \* A conclusion that Cincinnati Bell is best when it comes to fiber and future proofing the system to work with advances in technology;
- \* WiFi capability for circumstances when a fiber-first strategy simply won't work; and
- \* Transparency in expenses.

Kenton County interviewed Cincinnati Bell representatives on April 5, 2021, which confirmed these conclusions.

Based on this process, it is our recommendation that the Kenton County Fiscal Court identify Cincinnati Bell as the exclusive entity to proceed to formal negotiations with the goal of developing the timeline, expectations, cost and associated contract terms for moving forward with expansion of broadband into the underserved and unserved areas of unincorporated Kenton County. Kenton County will also explore negotiated terms, in cooperation with incorporated cities, for the expansion of broadband into the underserved and unserved areas of those locations.

Upon successful negotiation, the proposed agreement will be presented to the Fiscal Court for consideration.



**BOONE COUNTY**  
KENTUCKY

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# Memorandum

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**To:** Judge/Executive Gary W. Moore, Commissioner Cathy Flaig, Commissioner Charles Kenner, Commissioner Jesse Brewer  
**From:** Jeffrey S. Earlywine, County Administrator  
Matthew Webster, Assistant County Administrator  
**Date:** 3/26/2021  
**Re:** Broadband Expansion RFQ Recommendation

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Access to reliable and affordable high-speed broadband internet connectivity has been identified as a critical issue for Northern Kentucky's families and small businesses. The desire to remediate this issue has been a goal identified by the Boone, Campbell and Kenton County Fiscal Courts for some time. The COVID-19 pandemic fully exposed the deficiency of broadband connectivity in the Commonwealth and the region as accessible and affordable broadband options are a lifeline to education, healthcare and employment. In areas where the digital divide is greatest, citizens are disconnected from services vital to health and welfare.

To address this issue (along with the lack of access to public water), the Boone County Fiscal Court established an infrastructure fund and identified a funding source in the fall of 2020. In partnership with Kenton and Campbell Counties, a Request for Qualifications was issued on September 22, 2020 with the goal of evaluating the qualifications of interested broadband providers to identify the best-situated entity to expand high-speed broadband to unserved and underserved areas of the counties. Four responses were received in response to the invitation. At the point of receiving the proposals, Campbell and Kenton Counties opted to not proceed in the process due to lack of available funding to move the project forward at the time. Boone County established a review team to evaluate the proposals.

It is important to note that unlike a Request for Proposals, the Request for Qualifications is intended to outline the project goals and ask respondents to provide a response and references that demonstrate their ability to design, implement and complete a project meeting the stated goals and not to request a specific proposal to meet the goals. In essence, to affirm their position as a strategic partner with the County in pursuit of our stated goals. Specific performance requirements, timeline, budget and guidelines are negotiated once the recommended candidate is identified and authorization to negotiate to affirmed by the Fiscal Court.

For the Expansion of Broadband Services RFQ, the following elements were identified as project goals to be addressed in the response:



1. Assess current access to broadband with available speeds and identify current/ on-going gaps in service for unserved and underserved areas of each county.
2. Develop a proposed system design that:
  - a. Remediate unserved/underserved areas of the County with a minimum speed meeting the FCC definition for broadband, but that strives to exceed this minimum standard (desired minimum speed that exceeds FCC minimum standard for broadband);
  - b. Identifies the infrastructure needed to support the delivery of leading-edge broadband services consistent with proposed design;
  - c. Supports the operational needs of individuals and businesses through a platform of high-speed internet services;
  - d. Establishes the conditions that strive to offer a competitive rate structure for the products and services delivered to end users over the network;
  - e. Uses all available technology options to deliver a sustainable infrastructure that is as robust and flexible as practical.
3. Establish Northern Kentucky as being at the forefront of the most connected communities in the Commonwealth, region and nation.
4. Provides flexibility such that the system design may be implemented as a whole or in phases on a county by county basis.
5. Provides for long-term service delivery to end-users with a high quality product and superior customer service.
6. Is able to be implemented as expediently and professionally as possible without compromising the integrity of the project. All counties acknowledge that an aggressive timeline is a major goal of this project and the ability to meet this goal should be reflected in submitted responses.
7. Has full transparency to the regional partners.
8. Is sustainable on a long-term basis.

The Broadband Expansion RFQ Review Committee evaluated the responses submitted on the following criteria to determine the finalist:

- Relevant experience and qualifications;
- Overall Quality of Submission/ Completeness of Submission;
- Financial soundness and capability to meet RFQ goals and objectives;
- Narrative addressing goals, objectives and requirements;
- Responses from references;
- Private funding and proposed schedule/timeline.

The scoring produced one clear finalist, Cincinnati Bell who was then invited to make a formal presentation and participate in a question/answer session. This session was conducted on December 4, 2020, with a panel of county staff and partner agencies that were invited to participate due to their connection and expertise with respect to broadband needs in the county. The panel included

Judge/Executive Gary Moore, County Administrator Jeff Earlywine, Assistant County Administrator Matthew Webster, Boone County School Superintendent Matthew Turner, Walton-Verona Schools Superintendent Matt Baker and Boone County Cooperative Extension Manager Jerry Brown. The presenting team from Cincinnati Bell included Jason Praeter, President and GM, Cincinnati Bell Entertainment and Communications; Chris Shoeny Senior Account Manager; Ted Heckman, Senior Director Government Affairs; Dan Mazza, Director of Sales; Dave Kramer, Director Product Strategy and Mike Wolf, Director Fiber and Access Planning.

The final step in the evaluation process involved speaking to a number of references that have engaged in similar projects with Cincinnati Bell. Interviews were conducted by Matthew Webster with the City of Covington and Butler Rural Electric Cooperative. The City of Covington is in the final stages of deploying high speed broadband fixed wireless access points throughout the city to address internet access for students, particularly those in low income census tracts. The project has resulted in the placement of 125 access points across the city and is 85% complete with a final closeout date of December 31, 2020. Butler Rural Electric Cooperative has completed a project to connect 2,000 customers with high speed broadband while linking the Cooperatives resources via broadband. The project was completed in one year and the Coop is exploring avenues to expand the program due to its success. The scope of the project was dictated by the allocation of resources to the project.

References noted the following during the discussions:

- Cincinnati Bell has vast resources in planning, design and data;
- The ability to leverage sub-contractors and internal resources in the region was very positive to the projects;
- Cincinnati Bell acted as a partner and worked through issues with the client in an efficient and fair manner;
- Upper Management was engaged in the projects;
- The most important responsibility to the County will be ensuring the contract is clear and responsibilities are assigned as desired to ensure a successful project;
- No regrets with the choice of partner for these projects.

Based upon the evaluation of the response to the RFQ, performance during the formal presentation, clarifications to questions and reference results, it is the recommendation of the evaluation team that the Fiscal Court identify Cincinnati Bell as the exclusive entity to proceed to formal negotiations with the goal of developing the timeline, expectations, cost and associated contract terms for moving forward with expansion of broadband into the underserved and unserved areas of Boone County. Upon successful negotiation, the proposed agreement will be presented to the Fiscal Court for consideration.