



BERRIEN COUNTY
MICHIGAN



For Immediate Release

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OVER 5,000 UNSERVED RESIDENTS IN RURAL BERRIEN COUNTY COULD GET HIGH-SPEED BROADBAND THANKS TO STATE OF MICHIGAN

St. Joseph, Michigan, June 20 – The Michigan High-Speed Internet Office announced its initial recommendations for the Realizing Opportunity with Broadband Infrastructure Networks (ROBIN) program today. This program will potentially bring reliable, high-speed broadband service to 10,081 residents and businesses in Berrien County, 5,256 of which currently lack access to broadband.

Midwest Energy & Communications (MEC) submitted a \$56.4 million application for ROBIN funding to expand internet service in Berrien, Cass, St. Joseph, and Van Buren counties. The application included a \$15.5 million investment from MEC and requested \$27.6 million from the State. Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties, along with townships and villages in the proposed counties committed over \$13 million.

If fully funded by the State, Berrien County will commit nearly \$4.5 million, and 16 townships and villages will commit over \$2.7 million. MEC will begin construction in the fall of 2023 and will finish by the end of 2026. Customers will get activated once construction in their specific area is complete, and those exact plans have yet to be determined.

The ROBIN program now enters a 45-day objection period, and final awards will be determined after objections have been validated. The State expects to make final award announcements in August 2023 and stresses that not all applications will receive full funding due to the objections.

“We’ve been working on improving connectivity in Berrien County for a number of years and are pleased with the State of Michigan’s announcement,” said Commissioner Teri Freehling, who is a member of the Berrien County Broadband Internet Task Force, or BCBIT. “High-speed broadband access is more than just a utility – it’s a life-changing essential we need to be successful in our daily activities.

"We're delighted to partner with MEC to bring this critical infrastructure to residents."

MEC is a rural electric cooperative, propane supplier, and internet service provider headquartered in Cassopolis, Michigan serving customers in Michigan and northern Indiana and Ohio.

Berrien County Board Chair, Commissioner Mac Elliot praised County leadership for its commitment to connectivity, highlighting the efforts of Freehling, Commissioner Jim Curran and Commissioner Rayonte Bell, who also serve on BCBIT, as well as former commission and BCBIT member Ezra Scott as being instrumental in the project's success.

Once completed, the project will ensure more than 80% of Berrien County residents have broadband connectivity. The following townships will participate in the grant: Baroda, Berrien, Bertrand, Buchanan, Chikaming, Galien, Hagar, Lake, Lincoln, New Buffalo, Pipestone, Sodus, Three Oaks and Weesaw. The villages of Eau Claire and Galien will also participate.

"We celebrate this announcement, which is a huge milestone," Freehling said. "Our objectivity is to ensure end-to-end connectivity for all residents. While this grant makes that objective easier, we still have work to do – and we will continue to focus on this critical work."

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