



**Connected**

A CONNECTED NATION Initiative

Addressing Your Community's Unique Needs

## Hardin, Jefferson, and Orange Counties, Executive Report

JUNE 2022

**SETRPC**  
SOUTH EAST TEXAS REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION



This project is funded by the Economic Development Administration (EDA) Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

**CONNECTED NATION**  
connectednation.org

# Table of Contents

03	Introduction
06	Project Deliverables
09	Recommendations
14	Conclusion



This project is funded by the Economic Development Administration (EDA) Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.



## Introduction



Between February 2022 and June 2022, South East Texas Planning Commission contracted with Connected Nation Texas (CNTX) to execute a broadband strategic planning process involving the leaders, residents, businesses, and institutions in three counties – Hardin, Jefferson, and Orange. The project was funded by the Economic Development Administration (EDA) Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

The **Connected Community Engagement program (Connected)**, a Connected Nation initiative, is designed to provide targeted data collection and analysis to examine the issues of broadband and technology access, adoption, and use. Information is collected through a survey process.

CNTX engaged a multisector community broadband team in each county and the County Judges from Hardin, Orange, and Jefferson acted as the champions for their counties.

Through Bob Dickinson of SETRPC, additional leaders were identified from important sectors such as libraries, chambers, and education, to solicit eligible participants to engage in their area of influence. Mr. Dickinson and CNTX participated in several community events to increase awareness of the broadband survey.





## Project Deliverables



CNTX's broadband planning methodology included a complete evaluation of broadband access, adoption, and use by gathering first-hand data from each of the three counties. The final product consists of an interactive web portal for each county, including data analyses and action recommendations based on the assessment findings and needs identified by the local team. The websites host an interactive community map of the most current broadband service and relevant survey results to contribute to more information on infrastructure decisions. The survey results and findings are included, as well as an Executive Summary and Technology Action Plan. Additionally, monthly reports of activities were submitted to Bob Dickinson and are attached to this document.



Links to program deliverables:

[Hardin County Interactive Portal](#)

[Jefferson County Interactive Portal](#)

[Orange County Interactive Portal](#)



Recommendations



## Technology Action Plan and SETRPC

Although each county had unique characteristics addressed in the individual action plans, they also share many of the same needs. At SETRPC's discretion, they could assist the counties in implementing selected goals and actions recommended by CNTX.

Examples of goals include:

### Goal 1: Broadband leadership at the county level is strong and local broadband planning initiatives coordinate with regional initiatives

#### Objective:

Bring together a local broadband representation of the counties to work with the SETRPC broadband committee to promote the efficiency and equity of broadband services throughout the region. Hardin, Jefferson, and Orange Counties should officially convene their broadband committee to support local needs and feed into the regional broadband committee to serve the area well. SETRPC could facilitate local county leadership with the organization of their broadband committee. The localized broadband committee could appoint one person to serve on the regional broadband committee. This would keep the flow of information consistent in the region. The committees should consist of representatives from several important sectors such as business, agriculture, health, K-12, and community organizations.

**Action 1** – Assign specific duties to the regional and local committees. Doing so can help focus their work and make it sustainable.

The committee's duties include:

1. Provide monthly updates to the county commissioners' court regarding activities surrounding broadband.
2. Remain current on broadband funding opportunities – both federal and state – and establish contacts in the Texas Broadband Development Office (BDO).
3. Be available to the counties to advise on federal and state funding opportunities. Currently, the following funding may be available to the counties.



# Recommendations



Program Name	Responsible Entity	Features	Eligibility	How to Apply
Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF)	U.S. Department of Treasury manages The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA)	The funds provide flexibility in eligible broadband investments to address challenges with access, affordability, and reliability. Note - these funds may be used for other things.	State, local, and Tribal governments: Texas has received over \$15B from SLFRF	Information may be found <a href="#">here</a>
Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund (CCPF)	U.S. Department of Treasury manages the ARPA	Carry out projects that directly enable work, education, and health monitoring, including remote options, in response to the pandemic.	The State of Texas is allocated through the Texas Broadband Development Office. Texas has until September 24 <sup>th</sup> , 2022 to submit its plan on how they intend to use this fund. Texas has received \$500M+.	N/A for local governments:  Additional information may be found <a href="#">here</a> .
ReConnect Grant and Loan Program	U.S. Department of Agriculture	Encourages the expansion of broadband services to rural areas by awarding grants and low-interest loans to eligible broadband service providers in areas without sufficient broadband access	States, local governments, or any agency, subdivision, instrumentality, or political subdivision, a territory or possession of the United States, an Indian tribe, nonprofit entities, for-profit corporations, limited liability companies, cooperative or mutual organizations.	The current round of funding is closed but will open again in late 2022.



Program Name	Responsible Entity	Features	Eligibility	How to Apply
Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program	National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)	Broadband deployment in unserved/underserved areas, broadband adoption, connecting anchor institutions, etc.	Texas will receive at least \$100M from BEAD and likely much more. A total of \$42.45B will be allocated to states. These dollars are not expected until 2023 at the earliest.	Information may be found <a href="#">here</a>
Digital Equity Act (DEA) Grant Programs	National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)	<p>Digital Equity Act State Planning Grants –\$60M to states for developing State Digital Equity Plans</p> <p>State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program –\$1.44B to states for implementing State Digital Equity Plans</p> <p>Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program –\$1.25B to grantees for digital inclusion activities</p>	Texas is eligible for the Digital Equity Act and the State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program. The Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program will allow Texas, political subdivisions, agency, or instrumentality of a state, tribal governments, nonprofit entities, community anchor institutions, local educational agencies, and entities that carry out workforce development programs.	Information may be found <a href="#">here</a>

This is not a comprehensive list, and opportunities may change frequently.

## Goal 2: Grant writing assistance is readily available to communities

### Objective:

Using the services of an experienced grant writer can head off delays in funding or prevent applications from being excluded from consideration. It can also assess the grant on a regional base and see if it is viable for the counties to work together.

**Action 1A – Make available a grant writer.** A grant writer available through SETRPC could allow each county to take advantage of its expertise. A joint agreement to share expenses for a grant writer



between Orange, Jefferson, Jasper, and Hardin Counties would help all parties and Bob Dickinson, Director of Transportation & Environmental Resources with SETRPC, could help arrange the collaboration.

**Action 1B** – Consider contracting a grant writer who works across the counties such as someone in the local governments, or from the universities or K-12 schools.

**Action 2** – **Have a grant writer determine the viability of grants before spending time and money.** An experienced grant writer would be able to review the grants and provide information to SETRPC on the viability for the counties. This will save time and money preventing the counties from spending resources on a grant that will not work for them.

**Goal 3: All residents within SETRPC region should become digitally literate and possess current and essential digital skills.**

#### Objective:

Increase digital skills resources and workshops on a regional level to help close the Digital Divide.

Digital equity allows all segments of the population to participate in society and the economy. This includes civic and cultural participation and having access to essential services like health care.

**Action 1** – SETRPC should facilitate the development of new resources in the region. Addressing regional needs can enhance workforce solutions unique to the area and promote needed skill sets. SETRPC can coordinate the development of already available resources around the region then catalog and promote them.

**Action 2** – Involve the various organizations and nonprofits in the area to host the workshops close to their communities and those who need them most. The Chambers and nonprofits, such as the American Red Cross, are excellent resources. Many already have content developed. Other organizations are:

- Local libraries in the counties
- Goodwill Foundation
- Public Library Association (a division of the American Library Association)
- American Library Association



- Grow with Google

Goal recommendations the counties have in common:

Goal Recommendations	Hardin	Jefferson	Orange
Establish central leadership in the county as a tool for economic advancement and community development.	x	x	x
Increase broadband speeds for county.	x	x	x
Curate workforce development and digital literacy curriculum for economic opportunities. Increase digital presence of public libraries.	x	x	x
Pursue regional planning opportunities with other forward-thinking and broadband - inclusive communities. Track State and Federal broadband funding as it becomes available.	x	x	x
Increase broadband adoption in the county by eliminating barriers such as affordability issues.	x	x	x



It has been a pleasure working with SETRPC and all of the county leaders. The information gathered about broadband access, adoption, and sustainability can help each county, and the region, to participate in the digital economy which is essential for economic development. Reliable internet can improve the quality of life for residents and allow communities to access services normally unavailable due to physical distances and other challenges.