

Broadband & Digital Equity Local Action Plan

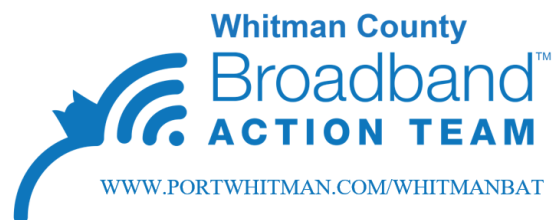
Whitman County



June 14, 2023

Pictured: Steptoe Butte by Paul Kimmell

Prepared by:



Introduction/State of the County

Located in southeast Washington, bordering Latah County in Idaho, Whitman County is predominantly rural. The county covers 2,159 square miles ranking 10th in size among Washington’s 39 counties and 26th in number of people per square mile at 20.7¹ The most recent population total for the county is 48,197, with its largest city being Pullman (32,827), followed by Colfax (2,808) and Palouse (1,008). Approximately 25% of Whitman County’s population lives outside of these areas.

The county is home to a major land-grant university (Washington State University) in Pullman, which accounts for a large portion of Pullman’s population with just over 19,000 students enrolled for the Fall 2021 semester². Among residents 25 years and older, 95% have completed high school and nearly 48% have obtained a 4 year college degree. Additional demographics of note include:³

| | |
|--|--|
| Households (HH): 18,010 | Population: 48,197 |
| People under 18: 7,326 (15.2%) | White alone: 84% |
| People 65 and older: 5,398 (11.2%) | Asian: 8% |
| Female residents: 23,665 (49.1%) | Hispanic: 6.8% |
| HH with a computer: 17,307 (96.1%) | Veterans: 4% |
| HH with internet service: 15,236 (84.6%) | Foreign born: 10.6% |
| Median HH income: \$43,613 | HH w/language other than English: 13.5% |
| Persons in poverty: 18.1% <i>(includes WSU students)</i> | People under 65 with a disability: 8.4% |

The Whitman County Broadband Action Team (BAT) operated informally for several years under the leadership of the Port of Whitman County. In 2022, with the opportunity for digital navigation funding, a more formal group convened to support the Whitman County Rural Library District’s application for these funds.

Our BAT’s vision is to improve the quality of life for all residents by working collaboratively with stakeholders throughout the county to equitably and affordably expand and enhance broadband service and facilitate digital inclusion through technology training and services.

¹ Whitman County Profile (updated March 2022), WA Employment Security Department

² <https://wsu.edu/campuses/#pullman>

³ Census.gov

This action plan is a dynamic document, based on input from BAT members and county stakeholders, a Rapid Design Study (RDS) conducted in April 2023 by Breaking Point Solutions/OptiDesign (funded by the WA State Broadband Office), input from the Port of Whitman County on past and current broadband projects, and conversations with internet service providers operating in the county as well as numerous organizations and entities.

Whitman County has made significant progress over the last five years in its broadband and digital equity efforts. We are fortunate to have a strong partnership between committed local and regional internet service providers and the Port of Whitman County, a leading open access infrastructure builder in the county. The RDS shows approximately 2,443 unserved broadband serviceable locations (BSLs) unserved. We have found through the launch of the Whitman County Rural Library District's Digital Navigator program in late 2022, that a not insignificant number of people prefer to live their lives off-line. Therefore, any future digital equity efforts in the county must have an additional component – making people aware of the *value* of online services and programs.

Ongoing BAT efforts will focus on the development of project areas, including cost estimates and preliminary engineering for BEAD funding, and work to increase speed test data for the western half of the county. We will also recruit additional members to the newly established BAT to ensure that all of Whitman County is represented in discussions and planning centered around broadband and digital equity.

Abstract

Broadband

- **Unserved/underserved locations and/or areas:**
 - Areas of greatest need are outside incorporated areas
 - Public safety locations around the county in general need a higher service level at an affordable price
- **Previous successes:** Several grants have been secured by the Port of Whitman County to build fiber-to-the-premise (FTTx) in multiple communities throughout the county over the last 5 years including Oakesdale, Tekoa, Rosalia, Garfield, Palouse, Steptoe, Diamond, Pine City, and the outskirts of Malden. Pullman Public Schools is currently implementing a fixed wireless citizen's band radio service network through funding from the State Broadband Office that will serve students with wireless connections up to 100/20 Mbps (actual speeds may vary with distance from the wireless tower).
- **Key partners:** Whitman County, Port of Whitman County, Pullman Public Schools, Emerge Technologies/Inland Cellular, FirstStep Internet, Galexis Technologies, IFN, St. John Cable, WiFiber, Ziply, WiFiber, First Step Internet, Avista Utilities, and Inland Power & Light
- **Obstacles:** The biggest obstacles to better broadband service in the county are the high per passing cost for sparsely populated areas, lack of matching funds, and the hilly terrain found throughout the county.
- **Next steps:** The BAT work will continue beyond completion of this plan to work with ISPs serving the county to refine the results of the Rapid Design Study and develop project areas for funding application submissions via BEAD and other NOFOs. This work will include identifying

the costs associated with extending power and fiber to existing public and privately owned tower sites to provide service to un- and underserved homes with fixed wireless. These fiber paths will also build last-mile fiber connections to all homes within 500-1,000 feet of the fiber.

- Construction estimates for the fiber builds that are needed
- Construction estimate for backbone access to all homes along the BTOP build
- Construction estimate to hit the homes along the Lamont backbone
- Draft MOU to outline the provider responsibilities and investments (for match contributions) and the county and port
- Tower construction cost estimates (\$250K ish)
- Include costs for easements and others

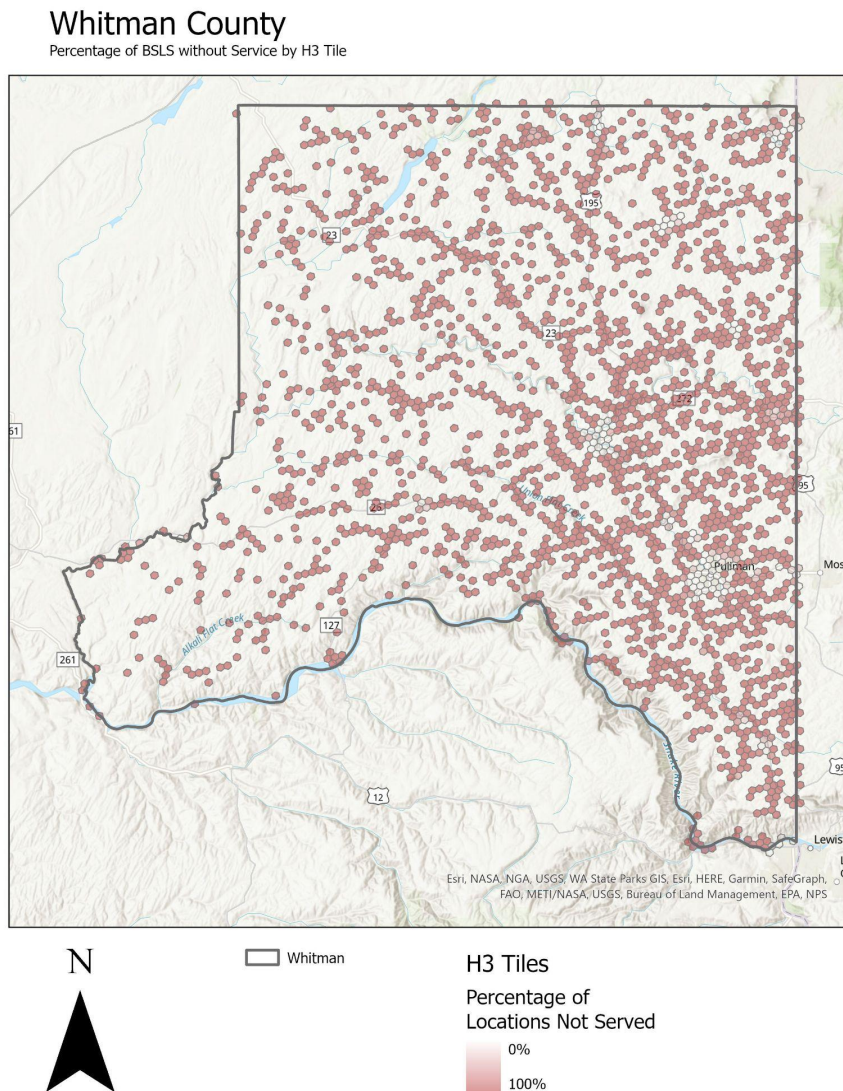
Digital Equity

- **Areas of greatest need:** All areas outside Pullman and Colfax that are served by the Whitman County Rural Library District were identified as areas of greatest need because the libraries around the county are typically open fewer than twenty hours each week, significantly limiting the access that these residents have to digital equity training, tools, and support.
- **Populations with greatest need:** Older residents, low-income residents, and disabled residents
- **Most prominent barriers to digital equity among the covered populations:** Convincing residents of the value of being online and residents being able to afford robust internet service and devices and willingness to sign up for ACP and similar programs.
- **Most prominent barriers to the successful provision of digital inclusion services:** Funding and consistent, sustained access to services (county libraries have very limited hours due to budgetary constraints) and an affordable, effective county-wide advertising campaign.
- **Key partners:** Whitman County, Port of Whitman County, Whitman County Rural Library District, Pullman Public Schools, Emerge Technologies/Inland Cellular, FirstStep Internet, Galexis Technologies, IFN, St. John Cable, WiFiber, Zply, WiFiber, and First Step Internet
- **Next steps:** Expand the BAT's Digital Equity representation, support the Whitman County Rural Library District's efforts to obtain funding to continue the Digital Navigator program already in place, and seek additional ways to communicate with the public regarding services and programs available.

Broadband Infrastructure Summary

I. Broadband Base Map Review

The map for Whitman County primarily reflects the truths of our area. In the denser populated areas, there are reliable internet service options. Once you leave the eastern parts of the county, you enter a sparse population density and will have trouble receiving high-speed internet; this is best exemplified by reviewing the number of served BSLs as a percentage of the total map. In this map the brown hexagons have 0% broadband service.



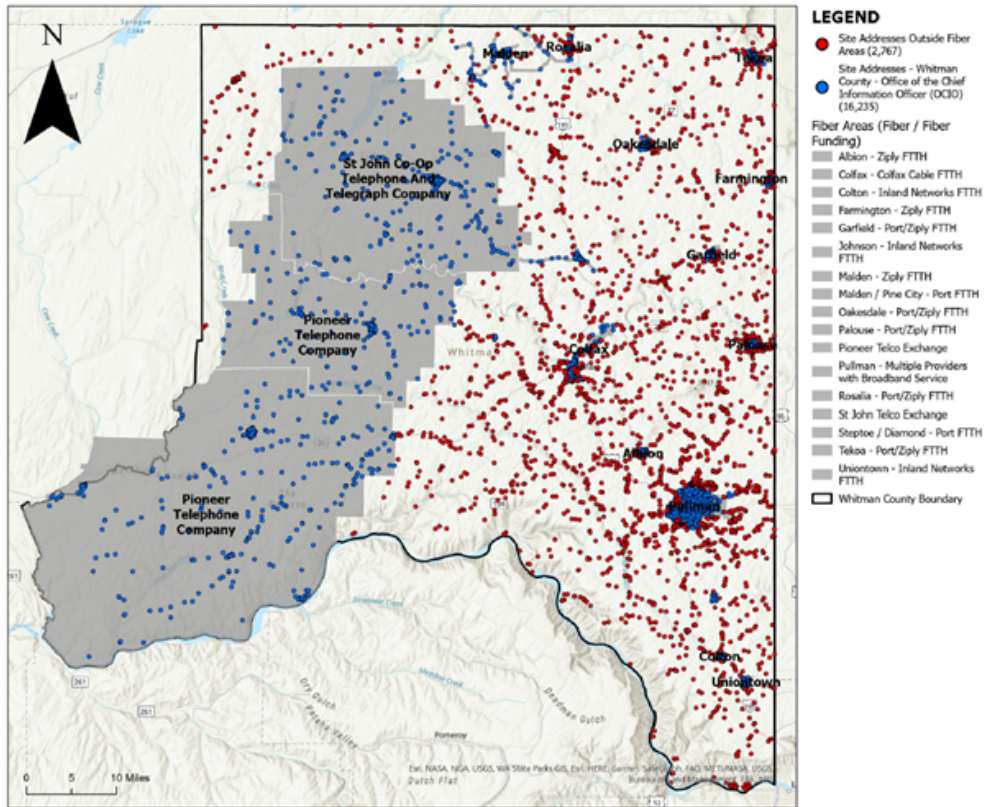
Two internet service providers in the county are reporting lower speeds than are standard for the deployed infrastructure. When asked if they were interested in working with the BAT to address broadband needs in the community, one responded they were not interested, and the other is still deciding. Resolving this would address a vast rural area of the county.

The upcoming funding heartens us, and we know that all technologies will play a role in bringing the internet to all in Whitman County. One technology that will likely have issues that may not be readily apparent is fixed wireless. While it is true that we have a lot of farmland in the county, fixed wireless will be hindered by its topography. There are many rolling hills, and the houses are often settled in the lower-lying areas, which makes it difficult to serve large numbers of people with a single tower.

Regarding speed test and deployment data, there is reason to be wary of some of the data on the map. We have made significant strides in Whitman County in the past few years, working with several providers to deploy fiber-to-the-home throughout the area. This investment is not accurately reflected in the maps right now. With this knowledge, we want to continue to build these assets as they will provide the most significant returns.

The Port of Whitman created the following map using an address data set provided by the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) of Washington State. This data set was then clipped using the Whitman County boundary from [Washington State Geospatial Open Data Portal](#), resulting in 16,235 addresses in Whitman County. The Port of Whitman then removed addresses within “fiber areas.” “Fiber areas” are areas that the Port of Whitman knows to have access to fiber-to-the-premise (FTTx) infrastructure or has funding to have FTTx infrastructure built in the immediate future. Files used for this process were:

- Incumbent Local Exchange Carrier Boundaries - [WA UTC - Telecommunication ILEC Exchange Boundary | ArcGIS Hub](#)
- City Limits – [L&I - City Limits \(Statewide\) | L&I - City Limits \(Statewide\) | Washington State Geospatial Open Data Portal](#)



Further analysis and conversations with local ISPs provided more detail on the broadband infrastructure and services available in the county. As a result of this collaboration, addresses in the following “fiber areas” were removed:

- **Albion** - When asked in April of 2022, Zply Fiber responded that “Zply Fiber currently provides 1000/1000 Mbps service to all 380 addresses within the city limits of Albion.” All addresses within the city limits were removed.
- **Colfax** - Colfax Cable completed their FTTH build to nearly all addresses in Colfax city limits. However, there are approximately 15 homes on the northeastern end of town (Red Tail Ridge which is served by unlicensed wireless from local ISP Galaxies) that Colfax Cable was unable to provide fiber service. All addresses within the city limits were removed.
- **Colton** - Inland Networks provides FTTH to the incorporated town of Colton. All addresses within the city limits were removed.
- **Diamond (Unincorporated)** - The unincorporated town of Diamond was included in the project area for the Port of Whitman’s open-access FTTH build funded in 2022 by an Infrastructure Acceleration Grant provided by the Washington State Department of Commerce’s Washington State Broadband Office and with match funding provided by St John Telco. Construction began in 2023 for this project. All addresses within 1000 feet of the Port of Whitman’s designed fiber backbone were removed.
- **Farmington** - Frontier Communications, which was acquired by Zply Fiber, received federal funding from the 2020 Auction 904: Rural Digital Opportunity Fund to construct FTTH in Farmington to be completed by 2024. All addresses within the city limits were removed.
- **Garfield** - In 2021, the Port of Whitman and Zply Fiber partnered via a 20-year irrevocable right

of use (IRU) to build an open-access FTTx network in Garfield funded by Washington State's Department of Commerce Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB). All addresses within the city limits were removed.

- **Johnson (Unincorporated)** - In January 2023, as part of the Port of Whitman's application to the Washington State Broadband Office for FTTx funding, Inland Networks responded to inquiries that "Inland Telephone is already in the process of building FTTH in Johnson." 31 addresses in the unincorporated town of Johnson were removed.
- **Malden** - Ziplly Fiber built FTTx in 2022 to addresses in the incorporated town of Malden, except for homes north of Pine Creek. The Port of Whitman County received funding from CERB in 2021 to build FTTx for the addresses around Malden and north of Pine Creek. Construction of this network began in 2023. All addresses within the city limits were removed as well as addresses within 1000 feet of the Port of Whitman's designed fiber backbone.
- **Oakesdale** - In 2021, the Port of Whitman and Ziplly Fiber partnered via a 20-year irrevocable right of use (IRU) to build an open-access FTTx network in Oakesdale funded by Washington State's Department of Commerce Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB). All addresses within the city limits were removed.
- **Palouse** - In 2021, the Port of Whitman and Ziplly Fiber partnered via a 20-year irrevocable right of use (IRU) to build an open-access FTTx network in Palouse funded by Washington State's Department of Commerce Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB). All addresses within the city limits were removed.
- **Pine City (Unincorporated)** - The Port of Whitman County received funding from CERB in 2021 to build FTTx for the addresses in and around the unincorporated town of Pine City. Construction of this network began in 2023. All addresses within the city limits were removed as well as addresses within 1000 feet of the Port of Whitman's designed fiber backbone.
- **Pioneer Telco ILEC** - According to installing contractors, local internet service providers, and collective community knowledge, Pioneer Telco has FTTx in their incumbent location exchange carrier (ILEC) boundary which covers a large portion of the rural western county. All addresses inside the ILEC boundary were removed. It should be noted that according to the [FCC National Broadband Maps](#), this area of the county does not have access to wireline speeds greater than 25/3 Mbps despite the fiber infrastructure being in place.
- **Pullman** - Pullman is Whitman County's largest city, and many providers serve addresses in Pullman with various technologies. Although every address in Pullman cannot currently be served by fiber, many are, and all addresses within the city limits were removed because a business case to build fiber can be made by private providers in this area. Ziplly Fiber's website shows areas around Pullman as "Under Consideration"
<https://zipllyfiber.com/new-fiber-locations/washington/pullman>
- **Rosalia** - In 2021, the Port of Whitman and Ziplly Fiber partnered via a 20-year irrevocable right of use (IRU) to build an open-access FTTx network in Rosalia funded by Washington State's Department of Commerce Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB). All addresses within the city limits were removed.
- **St John Telco ILEC** - The incumbent carrier, St John Telephone, Inc serves their ILEC area with FTTx. This includes the incorporated town of St John, as well as the unincorporated towns of Ewon and Lancaster. All addresses inside the St John Telco ILEC area were removed.
- **Steptoe (Unincorporated)** - The unincorporated town of Steptoe was included in the project area

for the Port of Whitman’s open-access FTTx build funded in 2022 by an Infrastructure Acceleration Grant provided by the Washington State Department of Commerce’s Washington State Broadband Office and with match funding provided by St John Telco. Construction began in 2023 for this project. All addresses within 1000 feet of the Port of Whitman’s designed fiber backbone were removed.

- **Tekoa** - In 2021, the Port of Whitman and Zply Fiber partnered via a 20-year irrevocable right of use (IRU) to build an open-access FTTx network in Tekoa funded by Washington State’s Department of Commerce Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB). All addresses within the city limits were removed.
- **Uniontown** - Inland Networks provides FTTx to the incorporated town of Uniontown. All addresses within the city limits were removed.

As a result of this process, the Port of Whitman County estimates 2,767 addresses in Whitman County are outside of “fiber areas.”

II. Local Broadband Asset Inventory

Organizations currently serving our community with broadband assets

| ENTITY | ASSETS |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Public school districts | Wireless tower sites/public Wi-Fi |
| Crown Castle/American Tower | Cell towers |
| Port of Whitman County | Dark fiber, conduit, open access colocation facilities |
| Whitman County | Cell towers |
| Libraries | Public Wi-Fi |
| WSU | Tall structures |
| WSDOT | Conduit, ROW |
| Incorporated towns | Water towers, streetlights, ROW |
| Pacific Northwest Farmers Cooperative | Tall structures |
| KIP Development | Tall structures, conduit |
| Northwest Grain Growers | Tall structures |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Avista Utilities | Poles |
| Inland Power and Light | Poles |
| Whitman County Public Works | ROW, roads, bridges |
| Emerge Technologies/Inland Cellular | Towers, service over open access infrastructure |
| Pioneer Telephone | Fiber-to-the-home infrastructure in service area |
| St. John Telephone Company | Fiber-to-the-home infrastructure in service area |
| FirstStep Internet | Towers, service over open access infrastructure |
| WiFiber | Towers, service over open access infrastructure |
| Lumen | Fiber backbone, wholesale service to ISPs |
| NoaNet | Wholesale service to ISPs |
| Ziply Fiber | Fiber-to-the-home infrastructure in service area, open access colocation facilities, service over open access fiber, wholesale service to ISPs |
| IFN | Fiber-to-the-home infrastructure in Palouse, service over open access infrastructure |
| Galexis Technologies | Towers, service over open access infrastructure |
| Inland Telephone | Fiber-to-the-home infrastructure in service area |
| Wholesail Networks | Service over open access fiber, wholesale service to ISPs |
| Startouch | Towers, service over open access infrastructure |
| Cactus International | Service over open access infrastructure |
| Idaho Regional Optical Network (IRON) | Service over open access |

Upcoming projects that may allow for Conduit/Fiber/Infrastructure Placement

Whitman County plans to do a significant road project along the Moscow-Pullman Airport Road. This project would provide an opportunity to extend the existing fiber to the Idaho stateline, allowing for last mile connections to several housing developments, businesses, and a cell tower. This would also facilitate a redundant path between the University of Idaho and Washington State University and the towns of Moscow and Pullman. There are two bypass projects that the County and the City of Pullman incorporated in their long term planning. Both projects would offer an opportunity for extended mid-mile in the rural outskirts of Pullman and increase redundancy options for the area.

Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs) being well served

The BAT conducted CAI Outreach utilizing the form provided. Below is a compilation of responses received to the question: Are you satisfied with your current service? Please note that the next section will address CAIs that are not being well served.

| CAI | SATISFIED |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| Washington State University | Somewhat |
| Town of Garfield | Yes |
| Pullman Fire Department | No |
| Whitman County Fire District #5 | No |
| Town of LaCrosse | Yes |
| Town of St. John | Yes |
| Town of Endicott | Yes |

ISPs currently serving Whitman County (potential partners for upcoming work)

| National/Regional | Local | Satellite |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Charter Communications/Spectrum ● Zply ● Century Link/Lumen ● T-Mobile | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● WiFiber ● IFN ● Inland Cellular/Emerge ● Inland Telephone/Inland Networks ● Pioneer Telephone ● St. John Cable Company ● Colfax Cable Company ● First Step Internet ● Galexis Technologies ● StarTouch | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Airpipe (Priest Lake Broadband) ● HughesNet ● Starlink ● ViaSat |

Organizations providing data for our community broadband map and details on current speeds/pricing

| ENTITY | SURVEY |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| The Port of Whitman County | Local Asset |
| Pullman Public Schools | Local Asset |
| KIP Development LLC | Local Asset |
| Pioneer Telephone Co. | ISP |
| Inland Cellular/ Emerge Technologies | ISP |
| Colfax Cable Company | ISP |
| First Step Internet | ISP |
| IFN | ISP |
| Inland Telephone/ Inland Networks | ISP |

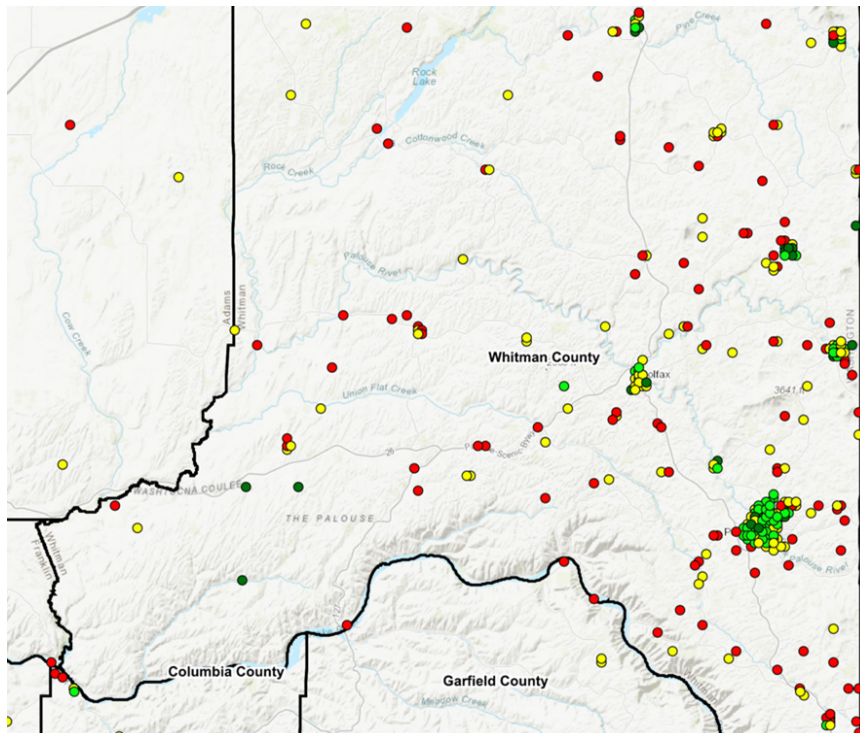
III. Broadband Infrastructure Needs Assessment

Community Anchor Institutions that need improved services or where cost of services is too high

- All library locations should have access to affordable 1Gb service (currently, the libraries are functioning with 100/100 Mbps).
- There are several public safety entities that we know of that are not happy with their service (Pullman Fire Department among them) and we suspect this is quite prevalent, although responses to survey requests have been low.

Areas lacking broadband

Within the legal boundaries of incorporated towns throughout the county, fiber service is available or will be available in the next 6-24 months, with the exception of Lamont (the town opted to stay with fixed wireless rather than achieve fiber to the home). In general, a high percentage of broadband serviceable locations (BSLs) outside the county’s incorporated areas have inadequate or no service options. The lower population density and elevation changes of the terrain make the per-passing cost in these areas high. The western half of the county is also missing open access mid-mile infrastructure. The independent telephone owned infrastructure in the majority of the western part of the county does not provide any connection across the county lines. For example, there is no middle-mile infrastructure connecting Washtucna in Adams County and Sprague in Lincoln County. Mid-mile fiber that connected across the county line would provide valuable redundancy for all three counties. In the most rural areas of the county, there are areas which only have access to unlicensed wireless or satellite carriers. These areas include: unincorporated parts of the county, Highway 270 between Pullman and the Idaho state line, South of 270 to Johnson, WA, and Wawawai Park area.



Areas where the cost of services may be too high for the average household

- Affordability is an issue throughout the county.
- For those outside incorporated areas, Starlink is often the best solution, but it is also a very expensive one for most households and therefore not always a feasible option.
- Towns with newly installed fiber to the home have a 60% use rate. While 60% use-rate is relatively high in the industry, affordability may be part of the reason the use-rate is not higher.

IV. Obstacles And Barriers To Broadband Infrastructure Deployment

Challenges to broadband deployment

- More middle-mile infrastructure is needed in the western half of the county
- Financial gaps preventing infrastructure investment
- Lack of population density creates a high cost per passing
- Escalated cost of materials
- Pole contact recurring fees/make-ready fees
- Terrain challenges, including rocky soils in the northwestern region and rolling hills
- Insurance costs and long-term affordability of maintenance and repair/replacement
- Cost to complete application (obtain cost estimates, GIS work, etc.)
- Small towns, especially, do not have required match funds
- Cost of tower site leases
- Cost to prepare grant applications is prohibitive
- Lack of funding sources for projects

Workforce gaps

- Lack of qualified, technically skilled labor (not only for installation but also maintenance), especially with an expected glut of BEAD awards in the future
- Capacity issues with some utilities and inability to quickly process permits and make ready requests for pole attachments
- Lack of personnel/capacity for National Historic Preservation Act (HSPA) implementation

Policy barriers

- Zoning issues for towers (restrictive or underdeveloped)
- ISP challenge process does not hold ISPs accountable
- Some ISPs are unwilling to partner with a public entity on recent funding cycles due to the open-access requirements
- Lack of standardized/streamlined processes for permitting and make ready

Community awareness issues

- How to make everyone in the county aware (effectively and affordably) of the Affordable Connectivity Program, who qualifies, and how to enroll/where to get help to enroll
- How to make sure non-adopters are aware of the benefits of being online for various activities

Geographic and environmental issues

- The rolling Palouse hills are not conducive to good wireless coverage
- Underlying rock formations are not conducive to underground fiber or pole installation
- Need to find an effective way to utilize railroad beds/trails as fiber pathways

V. Potential Paths Forward

Planned expansion areas

- Farmington - Ziplly RDOF funded area. When the Port pursued state funding to build this area, Ziplly provided a letter stating the company's plans to build fiber-to-the-home in the area by December 2024. The mayor of Farmington reports no progress has taken place as of June 2023.
- Steptoe/Diamond - WSBO funded area. The Port's/St. John Telephone's project to build fiber-to-the-home to serve these two unincorporated areas is under construction, with a planned turn-up date of September 1, 2023.
- Malden/ Pine City - CERB funded area. The Port's project to build fiber-to-the-home is under construction with a planned turn-up date of September 1, 2023.
- Newly funded grant from WSBO completes construction of Port's/Ziplly's fiber-to-the-home project serving Rosalia, Oakesdale, Tekoa, Palouse and Garfield
- Unfunded planned expansion includes fiber and power extensions to public and privately owned towers, fiber-to-the-home in Thornton, fiber-to-the-home along all existing mid-mile fiber

Possible funding sources

- WSU planning funds will be used to develop preliminary engineering plans, construction costs estimates, and support funding applications for the buildout areas needed in the county
- The most viable funding source for future broadband expansion is the BEAD funding made available by NTIA to Washington State. The BAT plans to develop a plan for how to reach every unserved premise with approximately \$30-40 million dollars. Any unfunded build out will need to be discussed at a county leadership level for other ways to allocate funding to complete the work

Local leadership

- Port of Whitman County, Whitman County, Pullman Public Schools, Whitman County BAT
- The county's Rapid Design Study has been reviewed by the infrastructure subteam as well as participating ISPs to assess and correct any missing or erroneous information. The BAT will continue to hone the RDS information to make it and the RDS tools provided as useful and as accurate as possible
- The BAT will continue to meet monthly and work to increase stakeholders represented and consulted. It will continue to gather information, serve as a forum for discussion and decision-making, highlight areas of need, and help to create and enact solutions for both infrastructure and digital equity related challenges.
- On May 31, and again on June 12, representatives from WSU Extension, the Port of Whitman County and the County met with local ISPs including: FirstStep Internet, WiFiber, St. John Telephone, IFN, Galexis Technologies, and Emerge/Inland Cellular. The group identified remaining gaps within the county, including areas that were currently being served with

unlicensed wireless. Prior to the second meeting, several providers sent .kmz files showing their existing infrastructure. The group discussed future fiber extensions that were needed to expand wireless coverage (including power extensions in some cases) and how these extensions could also serve homes with last mile fiber along the way. The next meeting is scheduled for June 27.

Workforce solutions

- Establishment of a technical skills center in the county to train additional workers, especially those needed for broadband and clean tech
- Explore partnerships with schools offering job skills training (Tekoa and Pullman)

Policy solutions

- Accountability and financial consequences (and enforcement) for the ISP challenge process
- Creation of a state insurance fund to help counties that do not have the tax base to fund maintenance and repairs once BEAD funds are spent, especially recovery related to wind storm or wildfire damage
- Any broadband activity undertaken by multiple counties should be examined for ways to streamline processes and make them more efficient with the goals of relieving the burden on municipal staff (especially staff in rural towns and counties where there are not enough staff, or any staff, working 40 hour weeks) and reducing waiting and processing times
- Facilitate counties working together as regions to maximize use of mid-mile infrastructure in neighboring counties as it may be more efficient and economical to seek connections in some areas from an adjacent county
- Mandate/incentivise that utility owners must replace poles with a new height standard that would facilitate fiber attachments on rural pole runs
- Mandate/incentivise that utility owners must seek easements that include future telecommunications attachments on pole lines
- Mandate/incentivise that utility owner install spare conduit during underground builds or at minimum encourage/require coordinate/outreach to broadband providers in a dig once philosophy

Digital Equity Summary

I. Demographic Base Map Review

Public data does/does not accurately reflect our local population characteristics

- Poverty rates for Whitman County are skewed due to the significant proportion of college students living off campus

Areas that appear to lack digital equity resources

- The primary providers of free Digital Navigator services are the libraries (both Neill Public Library in Pullman and the Whitman County Rural Libraries in incorporated towns throughout the county). With the exception of the main branch in Colfax, these county libraries are only open a handful of hours each week, significantly limiting the availability of these services for anyone living outside of the two largest cities (Pullman and Colfax).

Covered populations that are prevalent in our community

- Very low income and low income
- Disabled
- Veterans
- Ages 18-25
- Homeschooled students

Local layers added to the Basemap more accurately reflect our community

- Retirement homes/senior living facilities
- Rural healthcare clinics
- Additional low income and disabled housing
- Radio and TV towers
- Local ISP coverage areas

II. Digital Equity Asset Inventory

Organizations currently serving our community with digital equity services, and what the services are

| Organization | Highlighted Services |
|---|--|
| Whitman County Rural Library District Neill Public Library Council on Aging | Digital Navigator Program (verify) Communication |

| Whitman County Rural Library District Digital Navigator Pilot Program (January 2023 - May 2023) | |
|--|-----|
| Patrons served (in person or remotely) | 582 |
| Views of YouTube tutorials | 354 |
| Laptops gifted to date | 150 |

Upcoming events or projects that could support digital equity efforts

- Food pantry distribution days throughout the county
- Palouse Empire Fair (annually in early September) advertise the ACP and enrollment assistance as well as Digital Navigator services available
- Snake River Family Festival (annually, second Saturday in June) advertise the ACP and enrollment assistance as well as Digital Navigator services available
- Phase two of county-wide Digital Navigator program (if funding can be secured)

Organizations currently supporting covered populations but not engaged in DE efforts

- Council on Aging - individuals living in low-income households, aging individuals, veterans, individuals with disabilities, individuals who primarily reside in a rural area

Community engagement resources & spaces for classes, trainings, or meetings

- Council on Aging (Colfax)
- Communications channels (such as a newsletter) to share digital equity information
- Meeting space available for classes, trainings or meetings
- Public Wi-Fi (not including access restricted to customers and clients)

III. Digital Equity Needs Assessment

Demographics/populations that face barriers or lack access to digital equity services

- Retired people, young families (without child care), disabled/mobility issues, impoverished, people with mental illness, long-term care/assisted living residents

Sectors (gov't, community, cultural services) that face barriers to access or lack available digital equity services

- Lack of funding prevents county library branches being open more hours per week, limiting what services can be offered and when

IV. Barriers to Digital Equity

Barriers preventing access, adoption and use of the Internet and devices:

- Lack of awareness of how digital skills could enhance a person's life
- Poverty/economic distress- some cannot afford devices or an internet subscription to use them at home
- Lack of skills or the ability to build them

Barriers and gaps preventing the provision of digital equity support services throughout our region:

- Additional funding will be needed to continue the county-wide Digital Navigator Program (the pilot was funded by the State Broadband Office and expires June 2023)
- Staffing and funding for outreach for organizations
- Lack of dedicated spaces in rural areas to provide services
- Lack of effective and affordable communication to provide information on available resources

Community awareness issues inhibiting digital equity resources from being utilized:

- Lack of belief in the worth or efficacy of digital skills or a digital life
- Digital communication is difficult as many don't have a digital presence, or perhaps not a reliable one and analog communication is costly
- The rural nature of Whitman County means that it can be difficult to develop blanket trainings/services, as needs can be hyper-localized to the individual

Needs, gaps, or barriers in ability to assess the digital equity landscape of your community

- A list of specific skills we deem to be essential for the specific service area
- Ability to effectively and cost efficiently reach people with survey instruments

V. Potential Paths Forward

Possible funding mechanisms

- Whitman County plans to lead the Eastern Washington Rural Library Digital Navigator Consortium project by applying for SBO Digital Navigator funds this summer to expand their DN pilot program to include other counties with rural libraries
- In addition to the common state and federal funding sources, the Whitman County BAT will pursue local and regional funding opportunities through the following:

| | | |
|---------------------|---|---------------------------|
| -Innovia Foundation | -Friends of the WCL | -Xenodicans |
| -Rotary/Kiwanis | -Better Health Together | -Empire Health Foundation |
| -Inatai Foundation | -Lewis-Clark Valley Healthcare Foundation | |

- Whitman County Libraries will also work with other entities in the county (Council on Aging, CAC, assisted living facilities especially) to expand the reach of their DN efforts

Entities providing leadership in this area

- Whitman County BAT
- Whitman County Rural Library District
- Pullman School District
- Community Action Center
- Avista Corporation

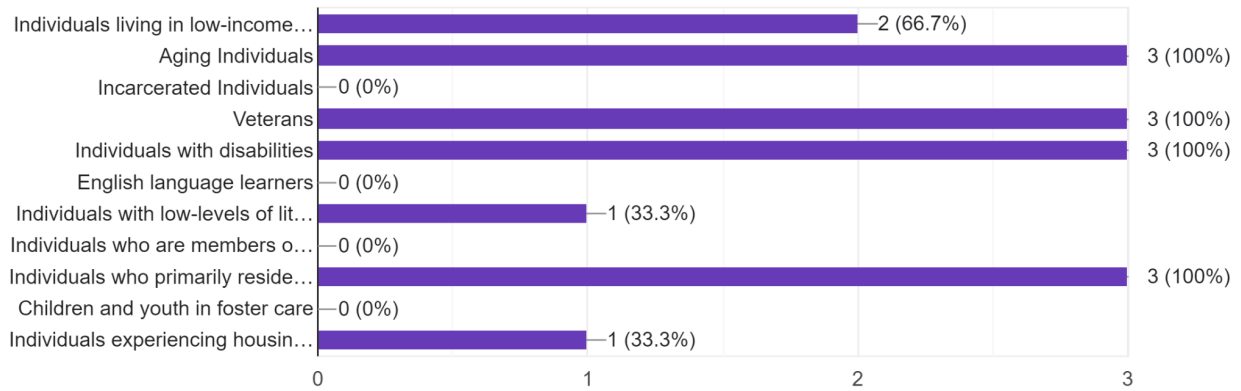
Regions/populations of high significance for outreach in our community

- Elderly
- Low-income
- Rural (any region outside of official city or town limits)
- Veterans
- Disabled
- Housing challenged

- Low literacy
- Farmers/Agribusiness (fiber to the farm opens up new training needs/opportunities)

We currently serve the following Covered Populations:

3 responses



Local ISPs interested in Digital Equity partnerships

All of the local ISPs informally provide digital equity services to their customers. They live and work where their customers live and work. As such, they often help install printers, set up email addresses, select new equipment, etc. They are all eager to support formal digital equity work that will support the efforts they already volunteer in this area.