CONNECT BALTIMORE BROADBAND GRANT PROGRAM
REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS

Office of Broadband and Digital Equity
A Division of the Baltimore City Office of Information and Technology

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1. Executive Summary

As technology continues to evolve, so must our policies for digital inclusion, with intentional strategies to remove the structural and institutional barriers to digital access and use. To address the digital divide, the Office of Broadband and Digital Equity (BDE), Baltimore City Information and Technology (BCIT) is introducing the Connect Baltimore Broadband Grant Program, consisting of $2M to fund broadband infrastructure projects in the most underserved Baltimore communities from the Digital Equity Fund.

The funding source for this budgeted expense is the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). ARPA allows for the investments in broadband infrastructure, specifically using ARPA funding to build new broadband networks through infrastructure construction and modernization. Funded projects must comply with the ARPA requirements. All federal rules regarding this funding must be adhered to by the applicant should an award be made.

To connect Baltimoreans to affordable, reliable internet service, with priority on communities with the most need, BDE is looking to partner with nonprofit corporations, anchor institutions, and community-based organizations seeking to close the digital divide in Baltimore. **This grant opportunity is designed to support applicants in creating Gap Networks and Community Networks. BDE understands technology and population distribution may require innovative options for ubiquitous broadband deployment.** As such, BDE is technology neutral - any technology capable of meeting speed, latency, redundancy and service level agreement (SLA) requirements set forth in this document is permissible.

These networks are designed to directly address the affordability challenge many low to moderate income household's face in subscribing to internet service. Given their purpose, the grant opportunity will help communities close existing gaps and lay the groundwork for improved broadband access, adoption, and utilization.

2. Summary of Program Requirements

This is a summary of the Connect Baltimore Broadband Grant Program requirements.

Eligible Applicants

To be eligible to apply, an applicant must meet one of the following criteria:

- Be a foundation, corporation, institution, association, or coalition that is— (i) a not-for-profit IRS approved 501(c)(3) entity and (ii) providing services within the State of Maryland; or

- A community-based anchor institution (also IRS approved 501(c)(3) or fiscally sponsored); or

- Any other organization or entity serving any of the very low digital inclusion areas on the Maryland Digital Equity Scorecard Index Map Digital Inclusion

(communitydevelopmentmd.org)(also IRS approved 501(c)(3) or fiscally sponsored); and

- Must be registered and, if applicable, in good standing with the Maryland Department of Assessments and Taxation; and
- Must be a Baltimore-based organization

Partnerships of multiple organizations, institutions/entities are permitted and encouraged; however, the applicant organization must be one of the above eligible entities.

Eligible Project Area

An area identified as having a need for additional broadband investment. This is to include lack of access to a connection that reliably meets or exceeds symmetrical 100 Mbps download and upload speeds, lack of affordable access to broadband service, or lack of reliable broadband. Applicants should provide a description of the community and evidence supporting the need.

- Consistent with guidance issued by Treasury, to determine an area's eligibility, applicants may choose to consider any available data, including but not limited to documentation of existing broadband internet service performance, federal and/or state collected broadband data, user speed test results, interviews with community members and business owners, reports from community organizations, and any other information they deem relevant.

This grant program is intended to provide broadband access to the communities with the most need. Therefore, priority for funding will be placed on communities geographically located in zip codes identified as very low digital inclusion zones. (Source: Digital Equity (arcgis.com))

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Network Requirements

- Projects must comply with all requirements outlined in the Department of Treasury's Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds Final Rule. (Source: 2022-00292.pdf (govinfo.gov)) Including, but not limited to:

- Services providers for a completed broadband investment project that provides services to households must provide access to a broad-based affordability program to low-income consumers in the proposed service area of broadband infrastructure that provides benefits to households commensurate with those provided under the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program.

- Projects must be able to provide a minimum internet connectivity of 100 Mbps down and 100 Mbps up with a maximum latency of 50 milliseconds measured at the served subscribers' location in areas with very low digital inclusion according to the Maryland Digital Equity Scorecard Index Map Digital Inclusion (communitydevelopmentmd.org).

  - May support projects able to provide a minimum internet connectivity of 100 Mbps down and 50 Mbps up with a maximum latency of 50 milliseconds measured at the served subscribers' location ("Broadband") only if the network is scalable to a minimum of 100 Mbps symmetrical for download and upload speeds based on future technology advances, with a maximum latency of 50 milliseconds measured at the served subscribers' location.

    The Internet Service Provider (ISP) will be required to submit a certificate as to circumstances preventing the ISP from achieving the minimum connectivity required. The circumstances preventing the minimum connectivity from being provided must be related to geography, topography or excessive cost.

Funding Limits

Funding will be limited to no more than three (3) grants.

- Minimum grant amount: $500,000
- Maximum grant amount: $2,000,000

Eligible Grant Purposes

Acceptable uses of these funds are to make available equipment, implementation, networking capability, hardware and software, or digital network technology for **broadband services to target populations at low or no cost**. This includes but not limited to:
- The building and deployment of new gap networks/community networks meeting the Network Requirements for covered populations.

- To upgrade or expand existing gap networks/community networks meeting the Network Requirements for covered populations.

- To operate and maintain new or existing gap networks/community networks meeting the Network Requirements for covered populations.

- Electronics necessary to deliver service to an end user including, but not limited to Optical Line Terminals (OLT's), Optical Network Terminals (ONT's), routers, switches, firewalls, wireless radio equipment, antennas, access points and modems and any necessary equipment shelters.

Timeframe

Applications are due on or before **May 24, 2024, 5:00 p.m. ET** and should be submitted via email in PDF format to bde@baltimorecity.gov.

It is BDE's intent to award funds beginning August 1, 2024. Projects must be completed by June 30, 2026.

Application Criteria

Through the Connect Baltimore Broadband Grant Program, BDE will provide funding to selected applicants to assist in the implementation of projects to create community-based gap networks or community networks. A panel will review submitted applications to ensure the information contained therein is complete and proposes eligible gap/community network project specifications. While the City will provide financial resources to help fund the project, the applicant will be responsible for the overall funding, implementation, and operation of the project.

3. Application Form

The application form (all of its components) must be completed in its entirety. Any missing information may result in the application being deemed ineligible. Instructions for the application form are provided to help guide applicants.

Failure to completely address each of the following sections or failure to provide the indicated information may result in the application being deemed ineligible. Please also submit proof of organization eligibility (i.e., proof of 501(c)3 status, proof of good standing with the Maryland Department of Assessments and Taxation, proof of Baltimore operating address).

3.1 Project Summary

Responses should explain how the project will further BDE's goal of closing the digital divide and ensuring covered populations have access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet. While there is no minimum or maximum length of the required response, please be concise and limit your response to the information requested.

3.2 Executive Summary

The executive summary should provide a brief, comprehensive summary of the overall project, the needs of the population to be served, how the project area was chosen and how the funding will contribute to a solution.

3.3 Statement of Experience

Applicants must provide a written narrative describing their demonstrated capability and experience, if any, as it relates to the proposed project and services provided in Baltimore. The applicant must include principal employees' relevant work experience that would ensure the success of the project. Describe any past network deployments and successes.

3.4 Network Design

The description of the network to be constructed should provide the network speed, latency capabilities and backhaul requirements. The description should discuss pole attached vs. underground for wired networks and tower type and equipment expectations for a wireless network. Identify whether the network build-out will be performed by the applicant, or if contracted services will be utilized, or a combination of the two. While it is anticipated that the applicant will ultimately own and operate the network constructed, please confirm the operations and any restrictions to be placed on the future use of any equipment and network constructed as part of the project.

NOTE: All proposals must include industry standards for "Fundamental Network Designs", which are but not limited to: Scalability, Availability, Security and Manageability.

3.5 Description of Community

Provide a description of the community and any existing internet service in the area as well as demographic data relating to the community and residents of the project area. Please also provide information on how many residents you plan will utilize the network. If offering service plans, please provide information on how many subscribers you expect to enroll.

Community descriptions should also include available demographic information of residents to be served through the proposed project.

3.6 Subscriber Cost (if applicable)

Provide a listing of subscriber service options for the project, their costs and any limitations of service such as data caps.

3.7 Potential Barriers

Discuss any barriers you might encounter, as well as measures to address those barriers.

3.8 Partners and Community Engagement

Applicants should include a list of community partners and describe their involvement in the building and deployment of networks. Partners may include but are not limited to: educational institutions (K-12, community colleges and universities), libraries,

businesses, nonprofit organizations, ISPs, and faith groups. *We encourage applicants to reach out to any partners in advance of developing their application and include letters of commitment in your application. Additional points will be available to applicants who include a plan to provide language accessible information/engagement, if relevant to the community being served.*

3.9 Intended Outcomes and Sustainability

Describe the intended outcome(s) and performance metrics for the project. How will this project be sustained over the next five years? Discuss how you will define success.

- Does the sustainability plan require ongoing support from the City or other grant funding?

- Discuss the impact of fees or other sources of revenue on the sustainability plan.

3.10 Schedule

Describe the proposed schedule for implementing the Project, assuming a Summer 2024 start. Provide a timeline with key milestones, including permitting review timelines. Projects must be completed by **June 30, 2026.**

3.11 Funding Scope and Budget

A scope of work related to the funding must be provided. The scope of work should be specific to the funding requested

Please include completed budget template with a narrative showing how you plan to spend the funding. The budget should be in the following categories:

- Operations (equipment, payroll, supplies, materials etc.)

- Contracted services (payments to independent contractors, external organizations, etc.)

- Travel (must be related to project deployment)

- Please also include all other funding necessary for the project including the anticipated source of the funds.

3.12 Compliance with ARPA

Describe how applicant will comply with the general requirements of ARPA outlined in the following:

- Sections 602 and 603 of the Social Security Act, as added by Section 9901 of ARPA;

- Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) Guidance on Recipient Compliance and Reporting Responsibilities, the most current version;

- Treasury's Portal for Recipient Reporting State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, the most current version;

- Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds Interim Final Rule 31 CFR Part 35 dated May 17, 2021;

- Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds Final Rule 31 CFR Part 35 effective April 1, 2022;

- Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds Frequently Asked Questions, the most current version;

- 2 C.F.R. Part 200 – Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, other than such provisions as the Treasury may determine are inapplicable to the SLFRF program and subject to such exceptions as may be otherwise provided by the Treasury. This includes, but not limited to, compliance with Subpart F Audit Requirements, 2 C.F.R. § 200.303 regarding internal controls, and §§ 200.330 through 200.332 regarding subrecipient monitoring and management; and

- U.S. Department of the Treasury Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund Award Terms and Conditions.

Following are some but not all of the broadband requirements related to ARPA:

1. Encouraged but not mandatory compliance:

   - Use strong labor standards, including project labor agreements (PLAs) and community benefits agreements that offer wages at or above the prevailing rate and include local hire provisions.

   - Demonstrate that their workforce meets high safety and training standards (e.g., professional certification, licensure, and/or robust in-house training).

   - Hire local workers and/or workers from historically underserved communities.

   - Directly employ their workforce or have policies and practices in place to ensure contractors and subcontractors meet high labor standards.

   - Not have recent violations of federal and state labor and employment laws.

2. Mandatory compliance:

- Compliance with 2 CFR 200, Appendix II (including provision of the Contract Work Hours and Safety Standards Act, 40 U.S.C. 3702 and 3704, as supplemented by Department of Labor Regulations (29 CFR Part 5).

- Reporting as required by the City and U.S Department of Treasury.

- Compliance with applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations.

- Meet environmental and permitting laws and regulations.

- Meet design and construction methods and use materials that are approved, codified, recognized, fall under standard or acceptable levels of practice or otherwise are determined to be generally acceptable by the design and construction industry.

- Prohibition on the use of grant funds to procure or obtain certain telecommunications and video surveillance services or equipment as outlined in 2 C.F.R. 200.216 and 2 C.F.R. 200.471.

- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Davis-Bacon Act are not applicable.

4. Reporting on Project Metrics

Selected applicants will be required to regularly report on the following metrics within project/progress reports submitted.

Percent (%) uptime for network
Number of residents accessing network
Number of households connected to low cost or free broadband

- Where feasible, demographic information of served households should be provided

Number of communities with public space broadband access (new or updated)

5. Additional Information

1. The City reserves the right to waive any formalities of the RFA process, to re-issue the RFA, to amend the RFA, to extend the dates provided herein, or to suspend the RFA as the City may determine, at its sole discretion, is in the best interest of the BDE.

2. No reimbursement will be made by the City for any costs incurred in responding to this RFA, developing or submitting responses to the RFA, or attendance at meetings or interviews.

3. The City reserves the absolute right to conduct such investigations as it deems necessary to assist in the evaluation of any response to the RFA, to establish the claimed participant experience, the responsibility, reliability, references, reputation, business ethics, history, qualifications and financial ability of the applicant, proposed partner(s), independent consultants and suppliers.

4. Successful applicants will be chosen based on qualifications, evaluation of responses, and a possible interview and/or site visit. The City reserves the right to conduct such discussions or negotiations as it deems necessary to assist in the evaluation of any proposal, to secure maximum clarification and completeness of any proposal, and to select the responses that best meet the requirements of the City and the public interest. 5. All awardees will be required to execute a Grant Agreement outlining the obligations of the awardee to the Project.

5. Questions should be emailed to Mariam Sannoh at Mariam.Sannoh@baltimorecity.gov.

Definitions

- **Access** – The existence of broadband infrastructure and availability of reliable high-speed internet plans.

- **Adoption** – Percentage of the population that subscribes to a broadband service.

- **Affordability** – Ensuring broadband service is not only available but can be obtained at reasonable pricing.

- **Availability** – Availability, also known as network uptime, represents the duration during which clients can consistently access resources like servers and printers on a computer network. Many organizations strive for achieving "five nines" (99.999%) of availability, which is a widely recognized high-availability standard, to prevent potential revenue losses caused by network slowdowns or outages.

- **Community Network** – Networks that deliver access to underserved areas with infrastructure built, managed and used by local communities.

- **Digital Divide** – The gap between those who have access to technology, the internet, and digital literacy training and those who do not.

- **Digital Equity** – Condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy.

- **Digital Inclusion** – Activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of internet service.

- **Digital Literacy** – Ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.

- **Gap Network** – Networks designed to offer very affordable or no cost internet access for lower-income households with low broadband adoption rates.

- **Manageability** – Network management encompasses two interrelated concepts, the process of configuring, monitoring, and overseeing the performance of a network, and the platform or system used by IT and NetOps teams to carry out these ongoing tasks effectively.

- **Non-Profit** – Organization in which no part of the organization's net earnings can inure to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual.

- **Optical Line Terminals (OLT)** – acts as the endpoint hardware device in a passive optical network. The OLT contains a central processing unit (CPU), passive optical network cards, a gateway router (GWR) and a voice gateway (VGW) uplink cards. It can transmit a data signal to users at 1490 nanometers (nm). That signal can serve up to 128 ONTs at a range of up to 12.5 miles by using optical splitters.

- **Optical Network Terminals (ONT)** – also commonly referred to as a "fiber box". The ONT is what allows the fiber optic cable to be connected from inside your home, out through your property and to the fiber network at the street. Then, it ultimately connects back to your internet service provider, allowing you to connect to the internet.

- **Scalability** – Scalability refers to the capacity of IT systems, including applications, storage, databases, and networking, to adapt and function effectively when their size or volume changes. It often involves the ability to increase or decrease resources as required to meet varying business demands.

- **Security** – Network security is the practice of safeguarding the foundational networking infrastructure against unauthorized access, misuse, or theft. It encompasses the creation of a secure environment for devices, applications, users, and data to operate securely.