

How a Regional Mapping Initiative Evolved Into a Statewide Collaboration

[Tom Bliss](#), Executive Director, Southeast Nebraska Development District

“One of the things we also knew is we needed this to be a statewide effort. Having a broadband mapping tool in our region really wouldn't be as effective if we couldn't make this a statewide plan and influence policy at the state level. So that's really when we turned from looking at this from a regional to more of a statewide planning activity.”

“ After talking to elected officials at both the state and local levels, we realized that there is a tremendous amount of misinformation out there on broadband. We hired the Institute for Local Self Reliance to produce a four part series on Broadband Basics. We worked with the Nebraska Economic Developers Association to build that four part series. Part one is that Broadband 101, explaining the difference between a megabyte and a megabit”

“Our elected officials are investing tax dollars to support these efforts and at the same time we're using this speed test data, not only bringing development, but increasing our presence in state policy and rule-making”

Q&A

Q: How did you all collect the speed test data? Or did you have a data partner?

A: We relied on GEO Partners for the speed test. When we signed up with them, the tool was helpful but not user friendly. They have since addressed this and it has become a truly robust tool for decision makers and stakeholders.

Q: Did you use any specific strategies to encourage participation in the speed tests that you found super successful? Especially for areas without Internet connection where residents might have to manually add an address?

A: Yes, we applied a number of strategies to encourage participation. We've partnered with the public power districts to include fliers in utility bills. We also attend a lot of meetings to work directly with stakeholders. We've done a lot of press releases, participated in interviews, social media posts, etc. The biggest return on investment was Nebraska's AARP. The state director saw such value in this that he offered to contribute funds... we passed on that though.

Q: Do you have an outreach plan on how to get people who are unserved/off-line connected to broadband? How are you identifying individuals or communities that don't have access to broadband?

A: Nebraska is behind Indiana in that respect, so we are building that plan currently. We are really focusing on 1) getting local decision-makers the tools that they need to make good choices, and 2) finding areas that are unserved and under-served.



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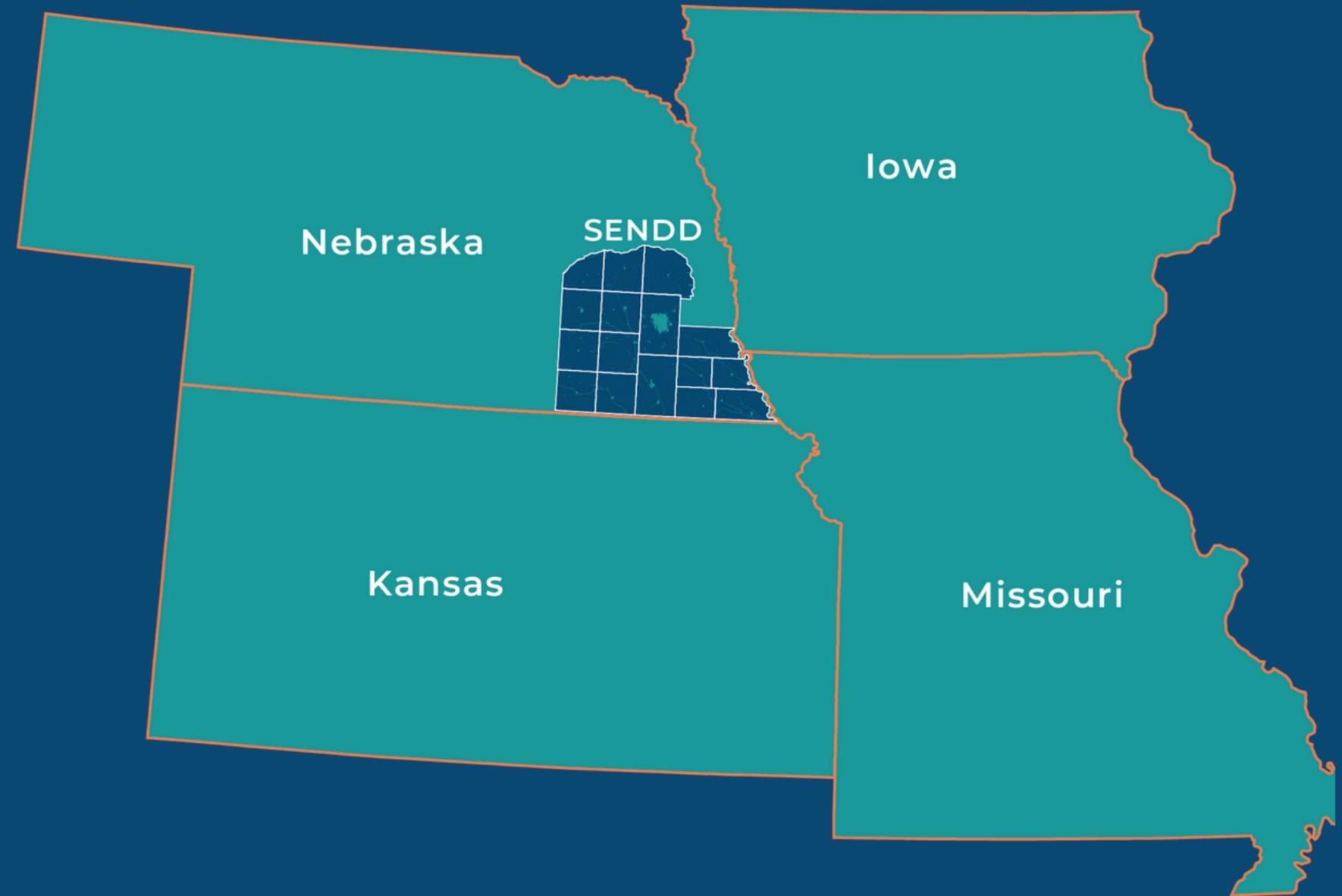


Southeast Nebraska Development District (SENDDD)

- Tom Bliss, Executive Director
- One of eight development districts in the state
- Economic Development Administration (EDA) district
- Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy's (CEDS) top priorities
 - Housing
 - Economic and Community Development (workforce)
 - Broadband

SENDDD's 16-County District

- 164 communities - 75% with fewer than 500 residents
- For context - Nebraska has approximately 1,000 communities, only 33 have populations over 5,000 residents



How It Began

SENDDD really began focusing on broadband in 2017 in an effort to expand our workforce by capturing remote workers.

Barriers -

- Access
 - Limited options
 - Unserved and underserved
- Speeds
- Inconsistent service
- 477 map data
- Access to capital in regards to building infrastructure

The Plan - Our Wishlist

- Better data
- Cost estimates for building out - fiber, wireless, and hybrid systems
- Engaging local stakeholders (elected officials, schools, healthcare providers, educators, businesses, etc.)
- Design digital inclusion plans
- Create competition
- Get help and not reinventing the wheel, i.e. contacting smarter people
- Make this a statewide effort

***The aim of the initiative was to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural areas.
Pandemic helped create sense of urgency.***

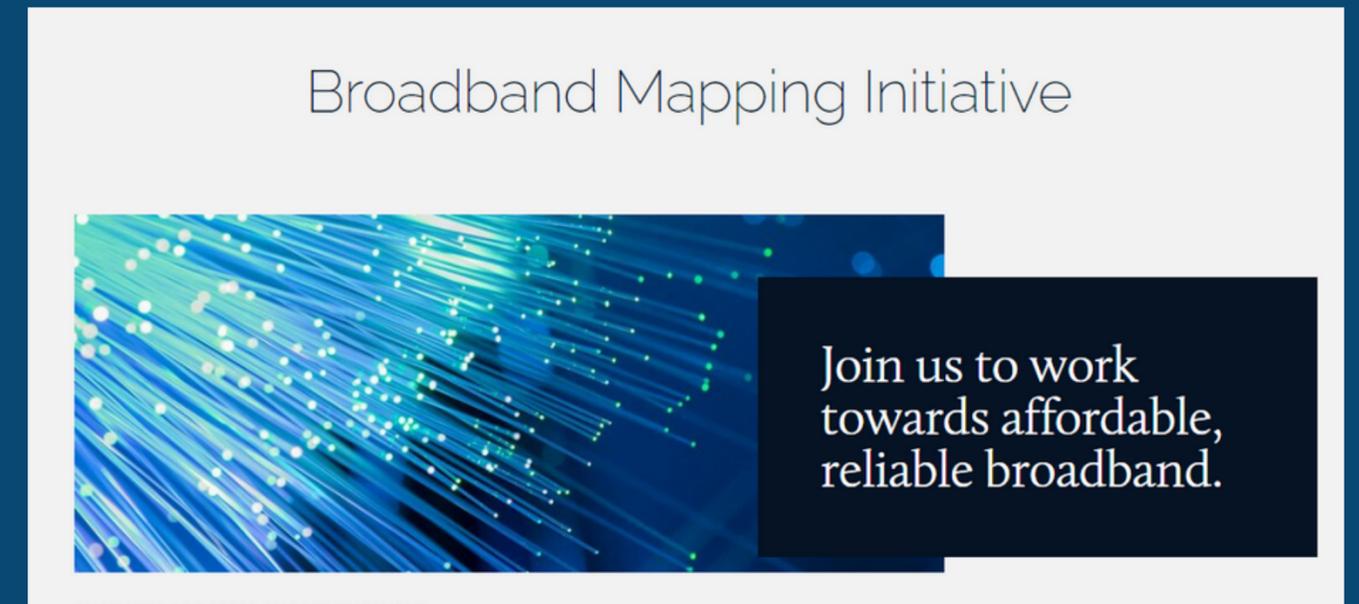
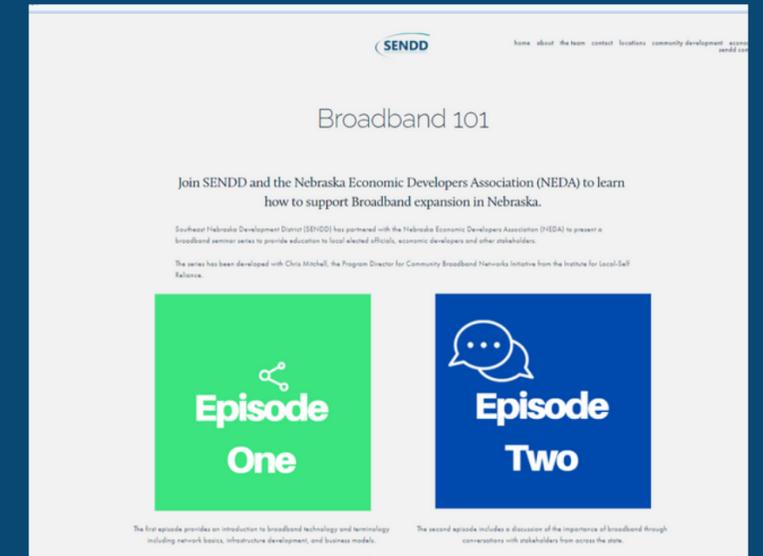
Act I: Where are We Now

Completed a nationwide RFP for parcel-based, speed test mapping over a two-year time period

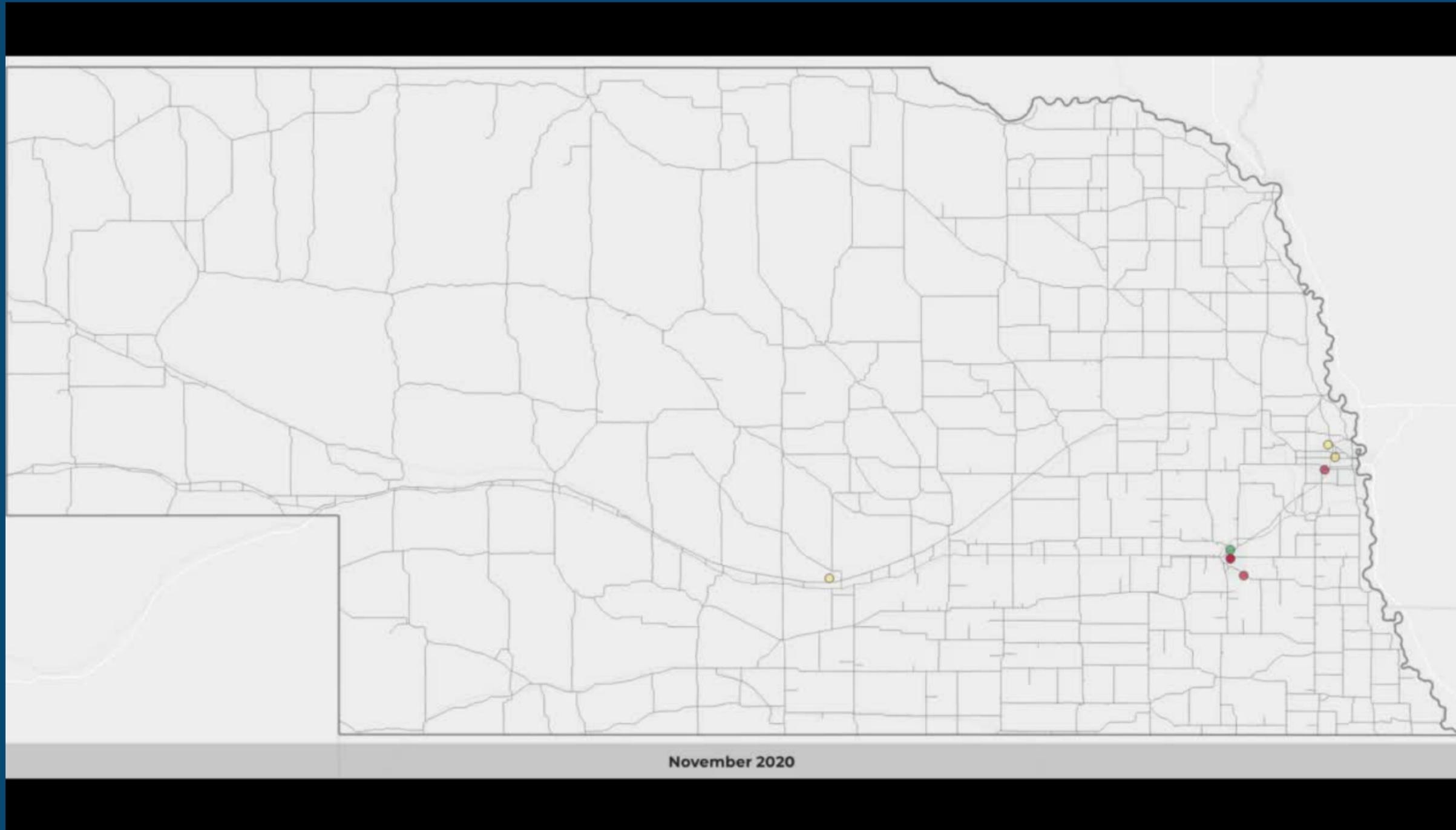
We used EDA CARES funds and partnered with the Nebraska Regional Officials Council (NROC) to incorporate a statewide approach

Started collecting speed tests in December 2020

At the same time, we worked with the Nebraska Economic Developers Association (NEDA) to build a series of Broadband 101 videos.



Act I: Where We Are Now



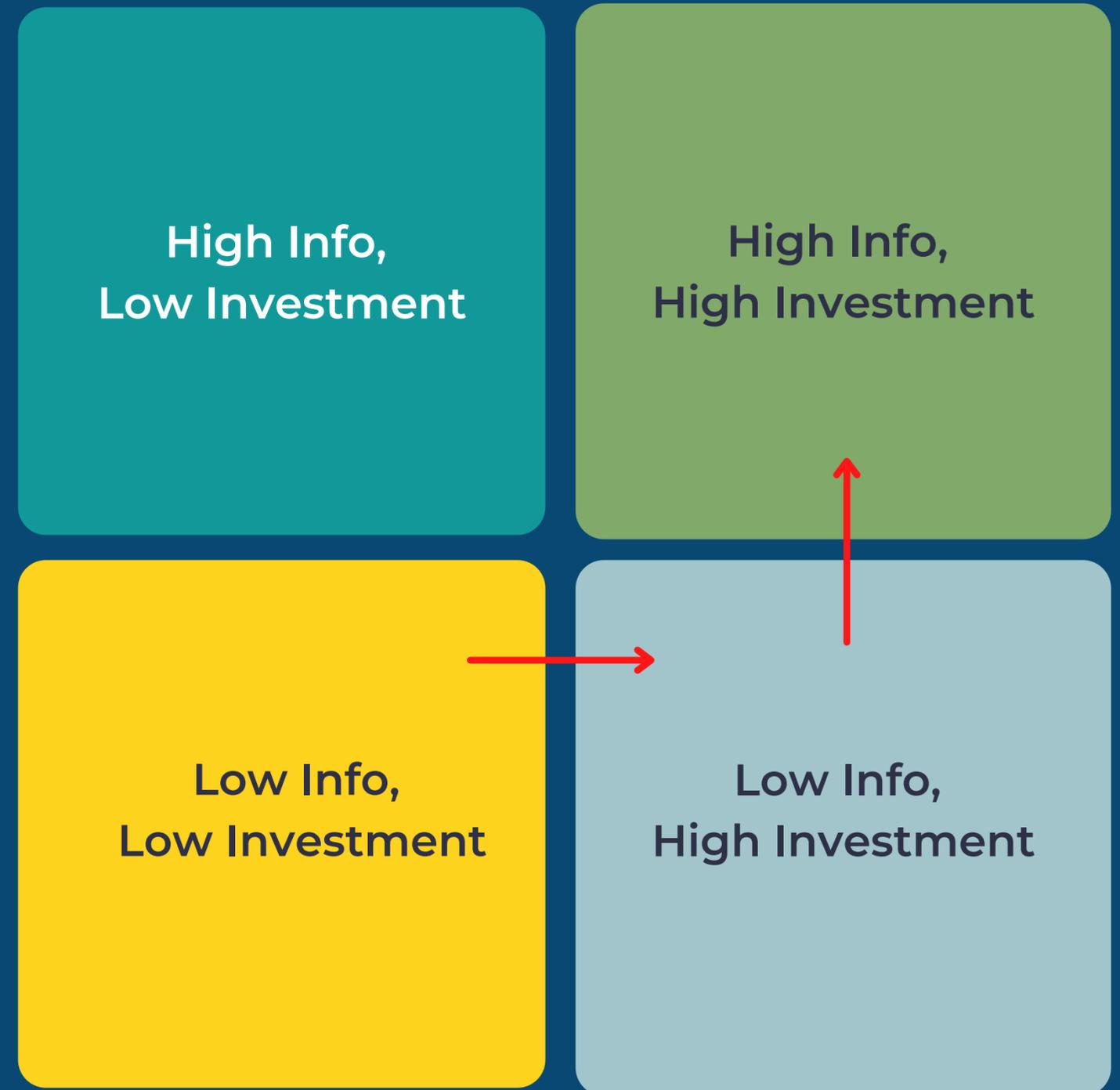
Act II: Where We Are Now & What We Are Learning

High Info, Low Investment - Least Feasible Intervention. Goal is to induce competition

Low Info, Low Investment - Planning Needed. BATs formation and grassroots awareness

Low Info, High Investment - Possible Intervention. Provide info and guidance

High Info, High Investment - Most Favorable Environment. Assist as needed



Act II: Where We Are Now & What We Are Learning

Stakes are high and communities need a plan

Speed tests are working -

- Data has been used in multiple state and federal grant applications
- County and state officials are paying attention
- Increased presence in state policy and rulemaking
 - Policymakers writing bills tied to the speed test
- It is giving us good reports that can be used for analysis

Need for digital inclusion planning -

- Broadband action teams are being built that include all unusual suspects, not just key business owners and elected officials.

Act III: What's Next

- SENDD partnered with Lead for Nebraska (Lead for America) on two Broadband Fellows
- March Broadband summit
- Continue gathering speed test data
- Use design tools to create estimates for project construction
- Improve local and state policies
- Learn from other states



NROC
Nebraska Regional
Officials Council

SEND

Bridging Nebraska's Digital Divide

A State-wide event to collectively seek solutions for improved broadband service



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SAVE THE DATE

March 21 2022
9:00 am - 3:00 pm

Learn from experts and join in regional community conversations
Beatrice | Broken Bow | Imperial | Kearney | Lincoln | Norfolk | North Platte |
Osborne | Plattsmouth | Valentine | South Sioux City

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The Rural Impact Hub is empowering rural communities throughout the state in a big way. We are partnered with Lead for America (LFA) as an affiliate program that places AmeriCorps Service Members in Nebraska's rural communities to serve and revitalize Nebraska's small towns.



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