

February 28, 2022



Governor Erik Holcomb  
200 West Washington Street, Room 206  
Indianapolis, Indiana, 46204-2797

Dear Governor Holcomb:

Over the past two decades, Indiana residents have learned of the decisive role that high-quality Internet plays in unlocking boundless education, healthcare, public safety, job creation, and economic opportunities. Reliable and affordable broadband can bring a world of information and promise within reach. Likewise, a lack thereof can have a generational impact on families and rippling effects on their communities.

With unprecedented funding available for broadband access and adoption, collaboration between state and local leadership is imperative. Tribal and local governments are uniquely positioned to seek on-the-ground solutions tailored to their community's needs. State support enables local leaders to make the best use of the myriad of resources available to help achieve ubiquitous connectivity.

By elevating residents' voices and fostering increased collaboration between state and local leaders, the Governor's Office could equip local officials with the key resources necessary for achieving their community's broadband ambitions. Congress' historic investment could provide the backbone for monumental state broadband strategies. We strongly encourage the inclusion of Tribal and local perspectives in Indiana's broadband and digital equity plans, ensuring maximum impact of this historic opportunity for decades into the future.

Next Century Cities supports community-based efforts to ensure that all residents have affordable, reliable, high-speed Internet access. We are a non-profit, nonpartisan organization born of the need to elevate community-level perspectives into broadband policymaking at every level of government.

Our organization is made up of more than 200 members in over 40 states, including Auburn, Bloomington, Chesterton, and South Bend. The mayors and other local officials in our network have demonstrated expertise in expanding digital infrastructure and developing broadband adoption programs. Many have confronted those challenges in their hometowns, even without state and federal support.

Municipalities understand the far-reaching consequences when residents lack broadband access or cannot afford the subscription price. As Indiana drafts a roadmap to spend the influx of federal resources, those plans must support local efforts to generate connectivity solutions for themselves, particularly in counties like Benton, Warren, and Rush, where there is little financial incentive for traditional providers to build infrastructure.



Incorporating local insights through transparent processes with staff dedicated to support ongoing collaboration could help the state meet the demands of a largely online workforce, increased telemedicine offerings, and schoolwork that requires a fast, resilient Internet connection. State tools that empower local participation can bring resource-strapped communities to the table to determine their path toward widespread connectivity.

Public-private partnerships, free WiFi connection points, and municipally managed infrastructure are only a handful of the innovative solutions that local governments have employed to ensure that every resident and business can access the wealth of benefits and essential services the Internet offers. Local leaders are also determined to paint a more granular picture of what service residents want and need, filling persistent information gaps.

Across Indiana, local governments are establishing inventive connectivity strategies. Counties statewide, including Vanderburgh, Elkhart, Kosciusko, Marshall, and St. Joseph, have worked to collect better information about residents' needs, which could offer important insights that inform the states' efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Communities like South Bend have investigated the challenges that hinder broadband access and adoption for their residents, seeking innovative solutions to ensure that everyone living in their cities has the tools they need to get online.<sup>2</sup> Cities like Bloomington are working with their county on regional digital equity plans, developing solutions tailored to the needs of their community.<sup>3</sup>

The State is distinctly positioned to bolster local access and adoption efforts, expanding initiatives' impact far beyond the strides that any single community can make on its own.

The need is expansive. The timeline is unforgiving. Local governments have made broadband equity a priority and will rely on ongoing partnerships with state leadership to effectuate lasting change.

Respectfully,

Next Century Cities

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<sup>1</sup> See Reed Parker, *Vanderburgh County Invests in Broadband Expansion* (Dec. 16, 2020), <https://www.insideindianabusiness.com/articles/vanderburgh-county-invests-in-broadband-expansion>; Area officials asking public to fill out broadband survey (June 29, 2021), <https://wsbt.com/news/local/area-officials-asking-public-to-fill-out-broadband-survey>.

<sup>2</sup> See Brittany-Rae Gregory, *Ten Minutes with South Bend's Chief Innovation Officer on Mid-Sized City Challenges* (June 16, 2020), <https://nextcenturycities.org/ten-minutes-with-south-bends-chief-innovation-officer-on-mid-sized-city-challenges/>.

<sup>3</sup> See the City of Bloomington, Indiana, *Digital Equity*, <https://bloomington.in.gov/digital-equity> (last visited Feb. 25, 2022).