

February 28, 2022



Governor Bill Lee
1st Floor, State Capitol
Nashville, Tennessee, 37243

Dear Governor Lee:

Over the past two decades, Tennessee 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 Tennessee'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 Chattanooga, Clarksville, Hendersonville, Jackson, Morristown, Thompson's Station, and Tullahoma. 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 Tennessee 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 McNairy and Benton, 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 Tennessee, local governments are establishing inventive connectivity strategies.

Chattanooga serves as a model for how communities can provide fast, reliable, and most importantly, affordable broadband access. The City's innovative approach illustrates how local solutions can create some of the most well-connected internet hubs in the country.¹ Through its electric utility provider, EPB, local officials deployed a fiber-optic network in an area once known for its poor connectivity. Now, EPB offers high-speed Internet services to residents and businesses alike while also providing affordable options for low-income families.

Cities like Memphis are working with local partners to develop long-term broadband strategies. Partnering with groups that improve technology skills, and equip younger residents for an increasingly tech-driven workforce.²

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

¹ See Lukas Pietrzak, *From Memphis to the Appalachian Mountains: Varying Connectivity Challenges Across Tennessee* (May 25, 2021), <https://nextcenturycities.org/tennesseconnectivity/>.

² *Id.*

