



## **Regional Broadband Authority**

November 8, 2019

After many months of deliberation and collaboration, a regional Broadband Steering Committee, under the umbrella of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, has developed the documents necessary to create a Regional Broadband Authority. The Committee was composed of City Managers, Chief Information Officers, City Attorneys and Council members from each of the Southside Cities. To move toward implementation of the regional broadband network, the five Southside Hampton Roads City Councils must now adopt a joint resolution to enable the creation of the Authority.

Virginia Beach has the distinction of being the port for the highest fiber connections on the East Coast and with that comes the opportunity to be one of the most connected regions in the nation. The transatlantic cables offer an unprecedented chance to accelerate the evolution of the region's digitization and diversification of its economy but only if we act now to ensure the enabling infrastructure is in place. The proposed regional broadband network creates the ability for Hampton Roads to become a hub for advanced research, telemedicine, data science, advanced manufacturing and other IT dependent applications.

The Broadband Network will not replace the independent service provider but will enhance competition and consumer choice. Connection to the network will improve the ability to reach more remote and underserved areas of the community with affordable, reliable, and redundant high-speed broadband access.

The implementation of the network will also serve area residents in a multitude of ways. It will improve public safety by facilitating regionally connected fire, police and emergency services. Our educational systems will have greater access to learning innovations such as virtual classrooms, e-books, and virtual tutoring tools. Telemedicine and the ability to transfer medical records and test results will be greatly enhanced and quickened. These benefits are real but time is of the essence. Hampton

Roads already lags behind other fiber-rich regions such as Chattanooga, Tennessee, Charlotte, North Carolina and even Roanoke, Virginia. To compete for emerging industries we must get in the game now.

Several amendments to the Comprehensive Agreement have been suggested that would, if adopted, unduly slow the creation of the authority and the ability to move forward with the completion of design, financing and construction of the 110-mile regional fiber ring. One request to allow for a voter referendum would defer Councils' formal vote until 120 days after its public hearing and change the agreement's effective date to another 90 days after the date of Council's affirmative vote. Combined this would stop progress toward the development of the regional broadband ring for a minimum of seven critical months.

The Virginia Beach City Council was briefed on the recommendation to explore ways to expand regional connectivity via a regional broadband strategy in January 2016 and again in August 2017. The regional Broadband Steering Committee has conducted open meetings during the ensuing months resulting in the Comprehensive Agreement now pending. The Agreement in Article I, allows for a voter referendum, "if substantial opposition is heard, in the judgement of its governing body... or upon petition of 10% of the voters." This process has given citizens sufficient time to be engaged and to seek a voter referendum without the concurrent damage of a lengthy delay in the approval process.

It has also been proposed that the Agreement be amended to require that all voting members of the authority be elected officials. As drafted, the Agreement allows the participating jurisdictions to appoint a primary voting member and alternative member to the Authority's Board. Some cities have chosen an elected official as the primary and some have selected their city manager. Virginia Beach has selected Councilwoman Rosemary Wilson as its primary and its Chief Information Officer as its alternate. Should the Virginia Beach City Council feel that both seats should be filled by elected officials, they can opt to do so without need to change the Comprehensive Agreement.

It was further suggested that any participating locality be able to withdraw from the Authority unilaterally. Such a withdrawal would jeopardize not only the investment made in the broadband ring by that locality but it could render the entire ring inoperable. The standard for withdrawal should necessarily be high.

Other suggested changes to the Agreement can best be resolved once the Authority has been established through the Authority's deliberative process. Given the inherent complexities, the Comprehensive Agreement should and does establish the parameters under which the Authority will operate. It should not be constrained in ways that might preclude its ability to adjust to market conditions, construction and financing alternatives. For such details to be determined in advance by five separate city councils, each acting independently, is exceedingly cumbersome, would require hours of study and deliberation and would stall the development of a regional broadband ring beyond reason.

Virginia Beach and the Southside Hampton Roads cities have a time sensitive, unique opportunity to establish themselves as a major destination for emerging cybersecurity business. The regional network will allow for more cost-effective and reliable internal networks, broader access to independent providers and to currently underserved communities. We have lagged behind similar regions in the country in the speed, pricing, reliability, and available choices for broadband Internet and information services. Further delay is ill-advised and unnecessary.

Virginia Beach Vision, Inc., on behalf of its 120 member business and community leaders, encourages the Virginia Beach City Council to vote passage of the documents, as agreed upon by the Broadband Steering Committee, and without addendum, to approve the creation of the Wireless Service Authority.

As approved by the Virginia Beach Vision Board of Directors: November 8, 2019