Request for Proposals

**Mountain County Broadband Assessment**

**and Feasibility Study**

# Purpose of RFP:

The Mountain County Advancement Foundation, Inc., (MCAF), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is requesting proposals (RFPs) from qualified professional consulting firms to conduct a comprehensive broadband assessment and feasibility study. The study will include:

1. an assessment of broadband service(s) in Mountain County, NC, to identify and evaluate service and/or adoption gaps; and
2. a broadband strategy for Mountain County that creates the greatest opportunity to support current growth and long-term community broadband needs, including, as applicable, a broadband partnership solution.

The study should provide a reasonable assessment of the needs and opportunities in Mountain County. Additionally, the study should document opportunities to expand last-mile coverage as well as express opinions of the sustainability of the expansion, including potential one-time and/or recurring third-party funding sources, and a deployment plan that will enable Mountain County and its commercial partners to take advantage of these opportunities in conjunction with broadband-friendly public policy development.

The successful bidder will demonstrate ability to utilize research methodologies such as public surveys, market analysis, business plan development, regulatory analysis, and operational best practice scenarios.

# Background and Statement of Need

Mountain County is in Western North Carolina just west of Asheville, and consists of a population of approximately 60,176 (NC Budget and Management-July 2015). The county is classified as a Tier 2 (average economically distressed) county by the NC Department of Commerce. The county is designated as transitional by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). The county’s unemployment rate was 5 percent in March 2016. During 2015, about 54 percent of Mountain County School students were enrolled in the free or reduced lunch program. Mountain County faces numerous economic challenges.

The county’s town seat of Mountain Town is located closer to two state capitals – Atlanta, GA, and Columbia, SC – than to Raleigh, which is more than 275 miles away. As a result, Mountain County is separated from the rest of the state geographically, culturally and economically. The steep mountainous terrain and lack of flat land have hindered economic, educational and cultural growth opportunities, leaving Mountain County as rural area.

The Pigeon River originates in Mountain County. It is the only county in North Carolina that all water flows out while none flows in. The county is believed to be the highest county (by mean elevation) east of the Mississippi River with a mean elevation of 3,600 feet and more mountains over 6,000 feet. Mountain County’s opportunities for economic development are also limited by the amount of its taxable land.

The current need for high-speed internet is similar to the need for electricity and telephone services many years ago. It is essential for most businesses and entrepreneurs. Students need internet access at home to accomplish many homework assignments. Mountain County profits greatly from second homeowners and visitors, most of whom need to remain connected to online resources during their stay. Many will not even consider purchasing a home here without adequate internet speeds.

Mountain County officials realize that additional access to high-speed internet service will provide benefits and opportunities for economic development, improvement in government services, education enhancements, access to tele-healthcare and telework and increased services to senior citizens and disabled persons. The county has a Broadband Committee; contact information for members will be made available to the awarded company.

A Mountain County Broadband Survey completed in February 2015 provided a detailed inventory and assessment of the communications infrastructure in Mountain County. The survey estimated that 22 percent had no broadband access, and 31 percent said they had only mobile access to broadband. In addition, 97 percent said they would be interested in additional broadband service options, and 83 percent said they did not have sufficient speed with their internet service. An additional factor that prohibits many families’ access is affordability. Considering the rate of poverty in Mountain County, many of the citizens will simply choose not to sign up due to the expense of the service. A map and addresses are available.

# Anticipated Timeline:

The following anticipated timeline is subject to change, at the discretion of the Mountain County Advancement Foundation (MCAF).

**May 19, 2016** RFP posted.

**June 10, 2016** Questions from perspective applicants are due by 4 p.m. Questions regarding RFP content must be submitted in writing to:

Name

Mountain County Advancement Foundation, Inc.

Address

Address

Phone: (888) 888-8888

Email: email@emailaddress.com

**June 24, 2016** MCAF’s written response to questions will be submitted to all known prospective applicants. If you are interested in receiving responses to submitted questions, email Name to indicate your request.

**July 15, 2016** Application submission deadline, applications are due to MCAF no later than 5 p.m.

*Return proposals to the following address:*

Attn: Name

Mountain County Advancement Foundation, Inc.

Address

Address

Phone: (888) 888-8888

Email: email@emailaddress.com

# Proposer Requirements:

1. Proposer must have experience conducting community broadband feasibility studies of similar size and scope to the Mountain County project. The proposer must demonstrate capabilities providing these services to similarly sized counties and ability to work creatively with incumbent providers and other key stakeholders.
2. Proposer’s organization must have been in business providing community broadband planning services for a minimum of four years. Proposer must have conducted broadband planning projects with other communities and demonstrate this through its proposal.
3. MCAF believes that direct industry experience is a fundamental requirement of the consultant to ensure business viability of the proposed strategies. Proposer must have direct experience working within the telecommunications or broadband industry (carrier or Internet service provider) in a network planning, engineering and business development capacity. This experience must be documented specifically in the proposal.
4. The proposer must have implemented and/or operated community broadband networks and must demonstrate such experience through its proposal, citing specific networks that are currently in operation.
5. Proposing firm must be able to demonstrate its ability to work quickly and thoroughly with adequate resources. MCAF feels time is of the essence; priority will be given to those who can complete this project on the shortest timeline.
6. If the proposer intends to use any subcontractors, the response must demonstrate the applicable experience of subcontractor(s) per above. The proposer is responsible for liability insurance for anyone performing work.

# Scope of Work:

Your proposal must address the following components, and include how you intend to carry out the various tasks and your experience in performing these tasks. In total, this narrative section should be no longer than ten (10) single-spaced pages.

# Conduct Needs Assessment

Gather, evaluate and analyze broadband information and broadband-dependent needs from users (i.e. residents, businesses, library, public safety and educational institutions), such as affordability of services and, as applicable, internet-enabled devices, digital literacy levels, perceived value to users, etc., via industry-accepted evaluation methods. The needs assessment should include current and future needs of these users. Develop a communications and outreach strategy to engage stakeholders, disseminate information and provide opportunities for inclusion in the process. Bidder must clearly define their stakeholder evaluation process, including their recommended participant level, in order to reach statistically significant and reliable results.

Broadband standards should be compared to those provided by the FCC.

# Conduct Local Broadband Market Assessment

Identify existing broadband options and costs across the community, particularly those for users identified in the needs assessment. Provide an assessment of the broadband environment detailing the types of services, pricing, availability and limitations, and compare to target broadband standards. Identify potential areas for partnership between the county and incumbent/competitive providers.

# Evaluate the county’s current broadband network capabilities

Perform a technical evaluation of the county’s existing fiber-optic network resources (public and private) and its ability to become “Google Fiber ready,” and support commercial broadband expansion to users identified in the needs assessment. The evaluation should include documentation of existing conduit, fiber-optic cable, vaults, boxes and related outside plant infrastructure as well as capacity and usability. To the extent possible, compare the county’s existing fiber-optic network with incumbent providers’ networks for possible synergies and/or gaps. Minimum 25 mps down and 3 mps down.

* + - The evaluation should focus on geographical areas that currently lack broadband access.
		- The evaluation should include opportunities throughout the county to increase broadband access as well as upload and download speeds to achieve greater opportunities for economic development activity.

# Provide a GIS‐based analysis for the project

Build a comprehensive database utilizing ArcGIS to facilitate analysis of the county’s broadband environment, including the following: current broadband infrastructure, penetration and usage of broadband services, service territories, backhaul routes, capacity, providers and other relevant information for the project.

# Perform a gap analysis of the current broadband environment

Evaluate the current environment against the current and future needs of Mountain County, including all stakeholders defined in the project. The gap analysis should include an evaluation of key issues limiting broadband expansion, access, and/or uptake.

# Assess North Carolina’s regulatory environment

Analyze and report on the North Carolina’s regulatory environment and the impact to Mountain County in developing its network for potential broadband services. Consultant must have proven telecommunications regulatory experience working with communities on municipal broadband issues. Please state experience working with other communities or alternative satisfactory experience in the municipal regulatory environment.

# Develop of market‐driven demand planning tools

Develop a GIS-based demand planning tool that identifies customer segments across the community and estimates demand for services. The tools should identify physical locations of all customers across multiple segments, and identify the potential volume and demand that will be utilized to forecast the feasibility of building into different areas of the county.

# Recommend broadband strategy

Based on consultant’s analysis in steps 1-7 and feedback from Mountain County, prepare a broadband strategy for the county that creates the greatest opportunity to support current growth and long-term community broadband needs, including, as applicable, a broadband partnership solution.

# APPLICATION

**Application Information (Must Be Completed and Submitted by All Applicants):**

Organization Name:

Contact Name:

Address:

City: State: Zip:

Phone: Fax:

Email: