2020-21

BAND-NC

BUILDING A NEW DIGITAL ECONOMY IN NC

REPORT

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

There's never been a more important time than the past 16 months to have broadband in your home. Students have needed it to learn; employees have needed it to work—and look for work— successfully; seniors have needed it to get health care safely. Broadband has become an essential tool for success and a critical instrument of equity.

When we launched BAND-NC (Building a New Digital Economy in NC) as a grant program last year, we knew there was a need to help communities meet the emergency needs they were facing to get all people connected to critical broadband services. And we knew we wanted to launch counties across the state toward a commitment to digital inclusion—the idea that everyone should have access to affordable broadband, and the equipment and ability to use it.

What we didn't know was how the program would resonate: how many applications we would receive from across the state, or how much support we would be able to generate to respond to those requests.

The response surprised us. Over the past year we've received 86 applications from across the state asking for support. And, building off of initial funding from the John M. Belk Endowment, Roanoke Electric Cooperative and the NC Electric Coops, we've received more than $641,050 from ten supporters to help meet those needs, including $125,000 in federal CARES Act support. That means money going directly to communities to solve immediate problems, and to begin planning to ensure long-term equity in broadband. Among the organizations receiving funding through our initial 24 "rapid-response" projects were libraries, school systems, churches, senior centers and broadband advocacy groups.

Dr. Dawn Gibson, Executive Director of Peletah Ministries in Craven County, credits the program with helping to keep their programs going through 2020: "The BAND-NC funding allowed us to make sure that the families we serve had the resources to maintain learning and access resources to support academic gains. It was a tough year for so many families but this funding helped ease the strain and that was a huge asset for these families."

Rufty-Holmes Senior Center in Rowan County was able to strengthen their programming with help from the BAND-NC grant. "The funds allowed seniors to have access to tablets, training and class offerings to help stay healthy, engaged and learning from home," said Executive Director Nan Buehrer.

BAND-NC funds led to the creation of the first digital inclusion plan in a rural NC county. Carteret County developed its digital inclusion plan (Connecting Carteret—A Plan for Digital Inclusion) with the help of a consultant hired from their initial $5,000 BAND-NC grant.

Don Kirkman, Carteret County Economic Development Director, credits BAND-NC with helping to move their county's plans forward: "An ad hoc broadband committee met for two years prior to the grant, but with no dedicated staff or funding there wasn't much we could do besides meet with outside groups to learn more."

Soon after, digital inclusion plans were developed for the four counties within the Upper Coastal Plain Council of Government. As of this report, 18 counties are in the process of creating digital inclusion plans.

In spring 2021, BAND-NC supported an additional 14 rapid response grants through CARES Act funding awarded by the NC Department of Information Technology. A third round of 18 grants was awarded in May 2021, supported by $155,000 in private philanthropic dollars, with an increased focus on developing and implementing county-level digital inclusion plans.
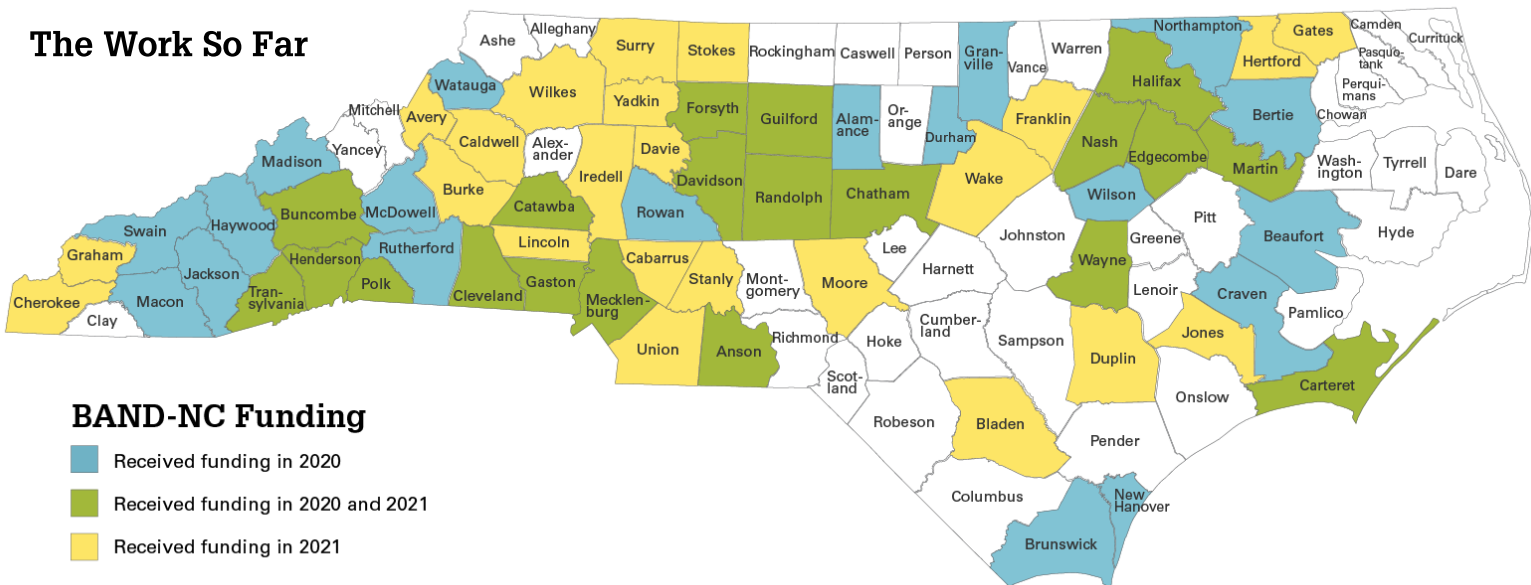
BAND-NC COUNTY IMPACT

Building a New Digital Economy in NC (BAND-NC) has supported thirty $5,000 "rapid response community innovation grants in 2020," along with a series of workshops led by IEI and the Broadband Infrastructure Office (BIO) to help communities develop "digital inclusion plans." Another thirty $5,000 "implementation" grants have been supported so far in 2021.
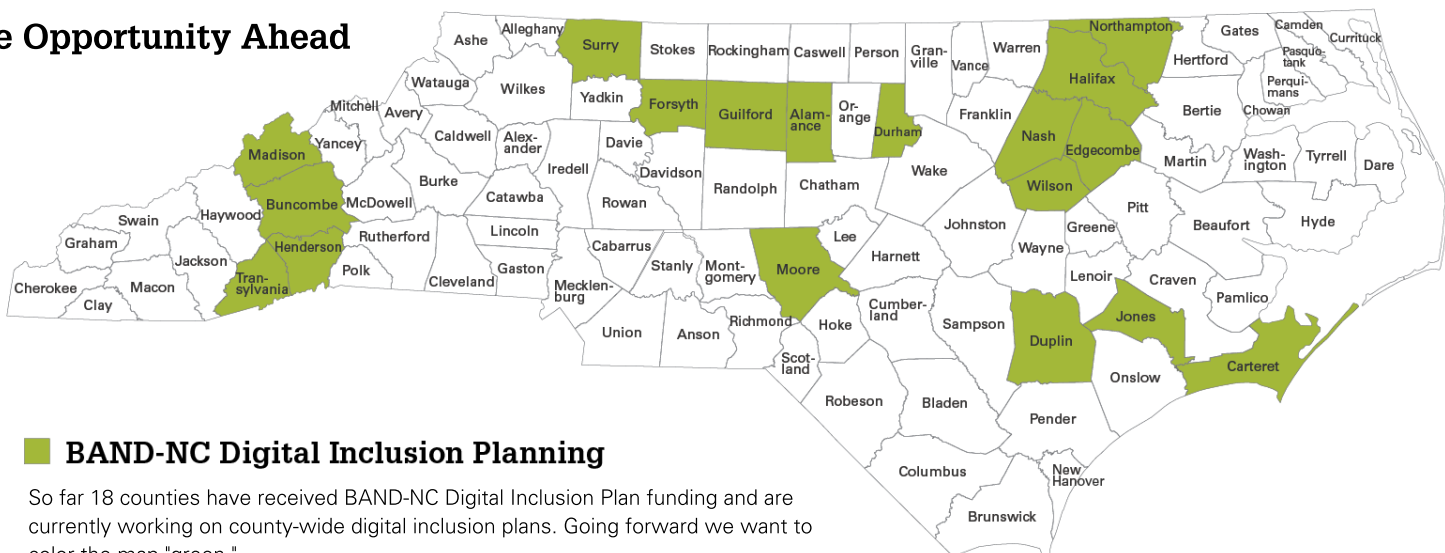
This effort, in a key partnership with the NC Broadband Infrastructure Office (BIO), and investments from Atlantic Telephone Membership Corporation, Corning, Duke Energy Foundation, Google Fiber, Hillsdale Fund, John M. Belk Endowment, NC Electric Cooperatives, PNC Foundation, and the Roanoke Electric Cooperative has contributed $641,050 to 62 counties.

The maps below showcase funding allocations for BAND-NC Rapid Response Grants and CARES Act Needs Gap Funding.

The Work So Far

BAND-NC Funding

- Received funding in 2020
- Received funding in 2020 and 2021
- Received funding in 2021

The Opportunity Ahead

BAND-NC Digital Inclusion Planning

So far 18 counties have received BAND-NC Digital Inclusion Plan funding and are currently working on county-wide digital inclusion plans. Going forward we want to color the map "green."

A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS

MOVING FORWARD

Our goal through BAND-NC is to make North Carolina the first state in the nation where every county has a digital inclusion plan, a well-developed set of strategies to help all residents get broadband—and the ability to use it. With the coming influx of federal and state dollars to local governments thanks to the American Rescue Plan and the impending infrastructure bill, much of the need for funding to support increased *access* to broadband has been largely met.

But while there is short-term funding to encourage household level *adoption* of broadband and computing technologies, there is no long-term strategy to support these efforts. Year Two of our efforts will be focused on development of digital inclusion plans, driven off of good data on who is being left behind, strong strategies to systematically close the gaps and a growing commitment that broadband for all is a critical 21st century infrastructure. To address this timely need, IEI is looking to release a fourth round of funding in November 2021, laser focused on encouraging development of *digital inclusion plans*. We thank you for your support through this critical startup phase of the program. We welcome your advice and support in our continuing efforts.

SUPPORT BAND-NC

Since the opening of the BAND-NC rolling grant application process, there have been a number of creative initiatives submitted, all aimed at addressing the ongoing challenges surrounding access and digital literacy. *Interested in supporting?* Please contact IEI Development Director Tony Reevy for more information at awreevy@ncsu.edu or 919.515.3543

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