TREASURE COAST REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL

MEMORANDUM

To: Council Members

From: Staff

Date: June 12, 2020

Subject: Matching Funds for U.S. Economic Development Administration Grant Application for Broadband Access

Background

Through the CARES Act, the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) has made new funding available to communities for potential projects that prevent, prepare for, and respond to Coronavirus, including for necessary expenses for responding to economic injury as a result of the Coronavirus Pandemic. This funding can be used to help communities catalyze public-private partnerships that will support economic recovery, including the deployment of broadband for purposes including supporting telehealth and remote learning for job skills.

Analysis

Broadband is an essential tool for innovation and economic development in every community. The Coronavirus Pandemic has brought to the forefront the effects of the “digital divide” that exists and the need for everyone to be able to work and learn remotely and easily access healthcare. To address this digital divide, broadband services need to be expanded in rural areas and underserved communities, and made affordable for all users. That access must include bandwidth and speeds to support e-learning, including adult learning and skills development for workforce readiness; and easy, on-line access to healthcare services. When individuals do not have broadband internet access, it inhibits their ability to learn, get training, locate jobs, and apply for those jobs digitally. Many people are transportation disadvantaged or not able to take time off work to go to doctor appointments. In addition, many communities may not have medical care readily available in town. Broadband will provide the means for individuals to participate in regular and follow-up appointments, which will lead to better health outcomes.

Council staff is preparing an application for grant funding through EDA’s CARES Act funding opportunity to develop a plan for addressing the digital divide in our Region. The project will create a regional broadband extension plan that will assess and address the digital divide in the Region by creating public private partnerships and identifying infrastructure projects to be undertaken. This project will create a roadmap that will include activities that:

- Develop a framework for a private sector - public sector partnership
• Identify private partners and areas for collaboration
• Identify areas where broadband service is not provided
• Inventory current resources
• Identify gaps in service and affordability
• Assess current resources and where infrastructure upgrades are needed
• Determine where hot spots can be located to deliver broadband access to underserved communities
• Develop policies related to the provision of broadband service
• Identify infrastructure projects and funding opportunities to construct that infrastructure
• Create plans for financing
• Create educational and outreach materials

Conclusion

The request will be in the amount of $100,000 and it is estimated that this project will take a year to complete. As part of the application, a 20 percent match is required. Council staff is requesting Council approval to submit this project application to EDA and pledge $20,000 to meet EDA’s cost share requirement, with the remaining $80,000 coming from the EDA. As shown in the proposed budget amendment, sufficient funds exist to cover this match.

Recommendation

Council should approve the submission of a U.S. Economic Development Administration grant application to create a broadband extension plan for the Region, with $20,000 of Council funding being pledged to meet the cost share requirement.

Council Action – June 19, 2020

Commissioner O’Bryan from Indian River County moved approval of the staff recommendation. Commissioner Adams from Indian River County seconded the motion, which carried unanimously.