



## Assessment of Blandin Community Broadband Program (BCBP) Using the Mountain of Accountability Framework

January 2020 – December 2021



Compiled by Blandin Foundation staff and consultants based on written reports submitted by program partners, Blandin on Broadband blog posts, and media reports

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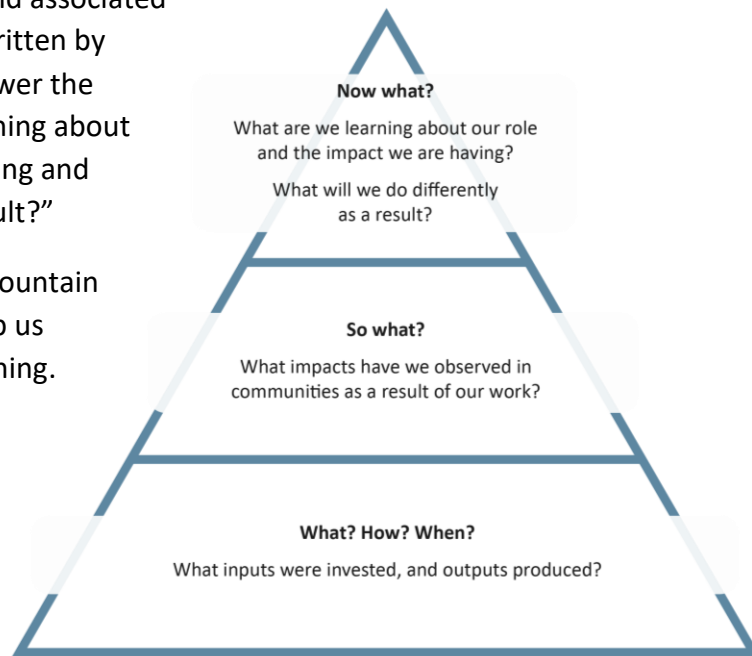
## Introduction

This assessment of the 2020-21 cohort of four new Blandin Broadband Communities and associated broadband-related activities was written by staff as part of staff’s efforts to answer the basic questions: “What are we learning about our role and the impact we are having and what will we do differently as a result?”

The report uses the foundation’s Mountain of Accountability framework to help us discern and apply what we are learning.

Information used to compile the assessment includes written reports submitted by community partners, reporting on the Blandin on Broadband blog, and in-person and virtual site visits and convenings.

The reporting period for this assessment covers January 1, 2020 through December 1, 2021, roughly the planned active period of the cohort.



## Program Overview and Context

Access to the internet is fundamental to equity, allowing for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.

Broadband unlocks doors to education, employment, telemedicine, opportunities to maintain social ties, and vital government services. The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged during this reporting period has only increased reliance on the Internet for access to work, school, services, and information from home, highlighting inequitable broadband access across Minnesota and the urgent need for increased access in rural areas.

The Blandin Community Broadband Program (BCBP) seeks to increase the access, use, and sophistication of use of broadband for quality of life, access to opportunity, and inclusive equitable economic development for rural Minnesota communities. The work’s guiding vision:

Everyone in Minnesota will be able to use convenient, affordable, world-class broadband networks that enable us to survive and thrive in our communities and across the globe.

To tackle this systems change work, Blandin’s broadband program deploys the full range of tools available to a private foundation – from education to advocacy.

Level of Engagement	Educate the Public	Engage Citizens	Catalyze Action by Others	Direct Advocacy
<b>Foundation Role</b>	Educate	Broker	Mobilize/Fund	Influence
<b>Ongoing Programming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blandin on Broadband Blog</li> <li>Webinars</li> <li>Research</li> <li>Broadband County and Tribal Profiles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conferences</li> <li>Regional Gatherings</li> <li>Cohort Meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grants, including feasibility studies</li> <li>Community Broadband Resources</li> <li>Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition creation and support</li> <li>Blandin Broadband Communities Program launched in six counties, concludes June 2023</li> <li>Accelerate! Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Governor’s Broadband Task Force</li> <li>Peer-to-peer advocacy for greater philanthropic investment in broadband adoption and digital equity</li> </ul>
<b>COVID Adaptations</b>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership for Connected Minnesota</li> </ul>
<b>Using philanthropy’s full toolbox</b>				

## **Funding Partners**

### **Minnesota Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation**

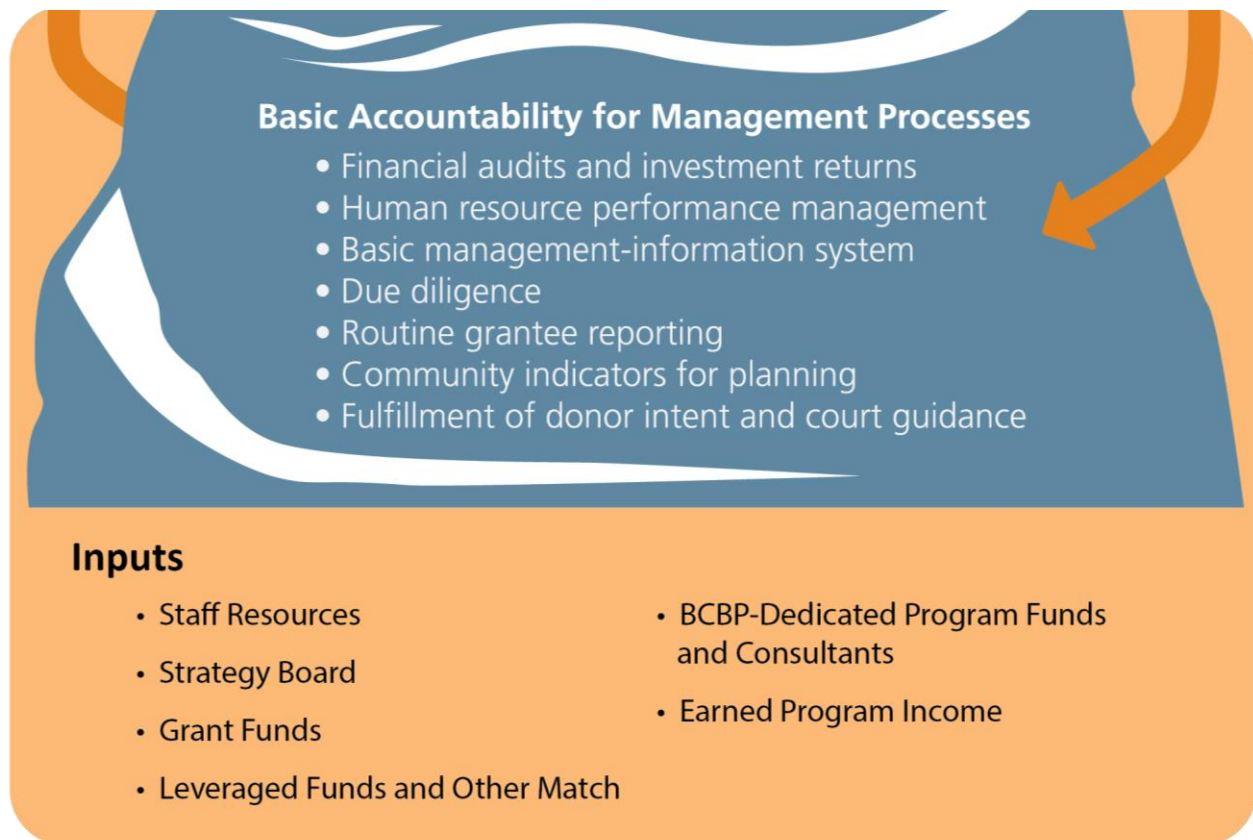
Since 2016, Blandin Foundation and the Minnesota Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation (IRRR) have partnered to deliver the Blandin Broadband Communities program to ten communities within the region to implement projects that address broadband infrastructure and technology-driven economic competitiveness using the Intelligent Community framework. Over four years, IRRR committed \$950,500 in grants to IRBCs to Blandin's \$256,955, leveraging nearly \$900,000 in additional community match.

In 2021 Foundation and IRRR staff partnered on the Arrowhead Intelligent Region initiative to bring those efforts to regional scale. As detailed later in this report, IRRR committed \$135,000 toward 14 grants totaling 545,130.

### **The Saint Paul and Minnesota Foundation**

In late 2021, Blandin received \$560,000 in grant support from Margaret A Cargill Philanthropies that enabled the foundation to expand its broadband work in rural Minnesota. The objective was to offer the Blandin Broadband Communities program to six of the poorest counties in rural Minnesota to redress digital inequities made worse by the pandemic through increased broadband adoption and use. The award was approved via the Margaret A. Cargill Foundation Fund at the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation.

## Foot of the Mountain: Basic Accountability for Management Processes



### Staff Resources

1.40 FTEs (Mary Magnuson .9; Bernadine Joselyn .75; Christy Hoskins .05; Linda Gibeau .05)

### Strategy Board

Provides strategic guidance, counsel, and quality control to the Blandin Community Broadband Program, including deliberation on grant applications and identifying program priorities and opportunities - from seventeen stakeholders<sup>1</sup> representing a range of experiences and perspectives from business, internet service providers, local and state government, tribes, education, and healthcare. The Strategy Board meets quarterly.

<sup>1</sup> *Broadband Strategy Board members:* Joe Buttweiler, CTC - Consolidated Telecommunications Company; Stacy Cluff, Mille Lacs Energy; Nancy Hoffman, Chisago County HRA EDA; Jon Linnell, North Region Health Alliance; Marc Johnson, ECMECC – East Central MN Educational Cable Cooperative; Scott Marquardt, Southwest Initiative Foundation; Betsy Olivanti, NE MN Small Business Development Center; Dan Pecarina, Hiawatha Broadband Communications; Rich Sve, Lake County; Jim Weikum, City of Biwabik, Arrowhead Library System; *Advisory members (non-voting):* Angie Dickison, Office of Broadband, MN DEED; Bree Maki, Office of Senator Smith

## **Grant Funds (totaling \$1,026,880)**

- **\$450,000** dedicated grant dollars per year allocated for broadband projects by Blandin Trustees for 2020 and 2021, which represents approximately 4.3% of total Blandin grantmaking during this reporting period; \$816,880 of which was awarded during the specified reporting period of January 1, 2020 through December 1, 2021.
- **\$135,000** dedicated grant funds from MN Dept of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation.
- **\$50,000** dedicated grant funds from Northland Foundation.
- **\$25,000** dedicated grant funds from West Central Initiative Foundation (2020 BBC).

## **Leveraged Funding and Other Match**

**\$1,772,152** in match was contributed by Blandin Broadband Communities, Arrowhead Intelligent Region and community project grantees, exceeding 1:1 match by 6%. Match exceeded grant dollars during this cycle for two main reasons. The first was that at least two BBCs used considerable CARES dollars as matching funds. Secondly, the AIR initiative contributed funding to several very large projects.

## **BCBP-Dedicated Program Funds**

**\$382,848** over two years; excluding staff salaries and including conference expenses (\$4,952 for 2020; \$1,600 for 2021) and consultants: \$376,296.

## **Earned Program Income (totaling \$125,000)**

- **\$15,000** from IRRR dedicated program costs for the Arrowhead Intelligent Region Initiative.
- **\$110,000** from SPMF dedicated consulting costs for Blandin Broadband Community program launch, most of which will be applied to 2022.

## 2020-21 Blandin Broadband Community Cohort

Chisago Lakes Area, Le Sueur County, Otter Tail County, Red Lake Nation, White Earth Nation.



*Blandin Broadband Communities Kick-Off Gathering; February 26, 2020*

## 2021-23 Blandin Broadband Community Cohort

Austin Area, Big Stone County, Lincoln County, Mahnomen County, Pine County, Warroad Area.



*Blandin Broadband Communities Kick-Off Zoom Meeting; September 28, 2021*



## **Blandin Broadband Community - Strut Your Stuff Tours**

Key to staff's reflective learning practice are the BBC "Strut Your Stuff" tours. These twice-yearly visits with each Blandin Broadband Community provide an opportunity for shared reflection and learning about the community work and about how the program might be adapted or enhanced for better outcomes and support. Prior to 2020 these were in-person site visits, but since the pandemic these have happened via Zoom.

BBC Steering Committees are encouraged to use the occasion to revisit the community goals that informed their activities, report on progress achieved toward those goals, and recommit to continued efforts. Staff and community teams discuss questions like:

- What need or purpose brought your group together?
- What community technology goals did you set?
- What community-wide impacts are you observing or expecting?
- What was most fun?
- If you knew then what you know now...
- How could Blandin Foundation have been more helpful to you in this work?

These conversations inform program review and adaptation and sometimes generate ideas for new projects or opportunities.

## Outputs

- Blandin Broadband Communities
- Information/Education Support
- Grants
- Convenings
- Technical Assistance

## Blandin Broadband Communities

Each of the four communities in the 2020-2021 cohort achieved the following milestones:

- Formed a diverse steering team of at least eight community members that dedicated time to program orientation and leadership training.
- Utilized the Intelligent Community model as an organizing framework to assess community strengths, opportunities and gaps.

### Intelligent Community Indicators

#### The Virtuous Cycle

[www.intelligentcommunity.org](http://www.intelligentcommunity.org)

Since 2009, Blandin Foundation has been using the Intelligent Community Framework as a tool to help community members see the role broadband infrastructure and the skills to use it play in overall community health.



Internet connectivity is a critical component upon which a community can build its workforce, support innovation through efforts sustainable over time. From those assets, a community can engage and include all people to create effective messaging to both internal and external markets with the goal of retaining and attracting talent and investment.

- Hosted virtual Vision and Project Development meetings with community members to complete a community technology assessment and design projects to advance a shared community technology vision.

- Received \$75,000 in funding to implement projects to improve broadband access and technology use in their area.
- Distributed at least fifty refurbished computers to families with low incomes, and/or to organizations to provide access to students, seniors, or low-income people.
- Spurred collaboration within and across the four communities and facilitated coordination on project implementation with regional economic development organizations, workforce centers, local businesses, libraries, and others.

## Grants

Twenty-nine grants approved for a total of **\$1,026,880** (See the Appendix for a complete grant list.)

- \$312,500 was awarded to five **Blandin Broadband Communities (BBC)**
  - \$300,000 to fund 21 community adoption projects in the 2020 cohort communities, plus a single \$1,000 donation to one BBC for planning support, and \$11,500 to a 2019 cohort community.
- \$545,130 to fund fourteen **Arrowhead Intelligent Region** initiative grants across the seven-county region to implement projects that address broadband infrastructure and technology-driven economic competitiveness using the Intelligent Community framework.
- \$101,250 to fund five **Robust Network Feasibility Fund** grants. Four \$25,000 grants were awarded for rural county-wide studies, including for two Community Broadband Resources: *Accelerate!* program graduates; and one smaller grant to a township looking to improve internet access via a survey and community meeting.
- \$68,000 to fund four **Broadband Innovation** grants in support of projects that advance access, adoption, and use of broadband. One grant helped fund consulting support for the Partnership for a ConnectedMN, another was to support the Minnesota Speed Test Initiative, and the third helped fund the cost of a Lead for Minnesota fellow to work on broadband in a rural county.

## Community Investments

Since 2003, we've worked with 71 rural Minnesota communities on more than 450 projects, investing \$5 million in Blandin Foundation funding and leveraging \$12 million in additional public and private funding for broadband access and use.



## Technical Assistance

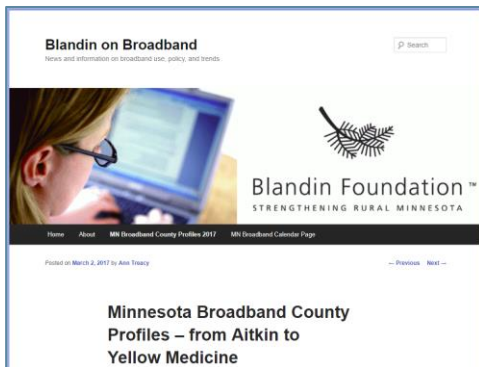
When seeking to map a path to a technologically vital future, communities often lack quality, tech-neutral, vendor-neutral advice. The *Community Broadband Resources* (CBR) component of the Blandin Community Broadband Program offers consultants to provide information and assistance to communities as they seek to meet their broadband needs.



Through CBR, communities can receive up to thirty-two hours of consultation and staff assistance. During this reporting period program consultant Bill Coleman delivered a total of 460 hours of assistance to twenty communities (average of 23 hours/community). The foundation was able to respond to every request received.

## Information/Education Support

Throughout the 2020-2021 reporting period the [Blandin on Broadband \(BoB\) Blog](#) and related monthly e-News continued to serve as the state’s key information resource on policy and practice related to broadband access and utilization. Blog content frequently was cited and amplified by other state-wide and national media.



Ben Winchester at the University of Minnesota is using the County Broadband Profiles in his research, various providers and the Office of Broadband Development routinely use the blog to share news, and blog researcher and author Ann Treacy was invited to speak at several online conferences.

The blog averaged 268 views per day in 2021 (up from 201 at last reporting). Events such as legislative action or funding opportunities increase traffic, as do links from other news sources, especially national news sources.

A fun recent anomaly was a daily jump to 6,537 views on October 11, 2021, which was the day we published the annual update of Blandin’s Minnesota Broadband County profiles. Each year we use data and maps from the Office of Broadband Development as well and past posts from the blog to update a broadband profile for each county and tribal government. County leaders, especially those whose counties rank at the “bottom,” such as Pine and Kanabec, use the rankings in public messaging to underscore the need for broadband action in their regions.

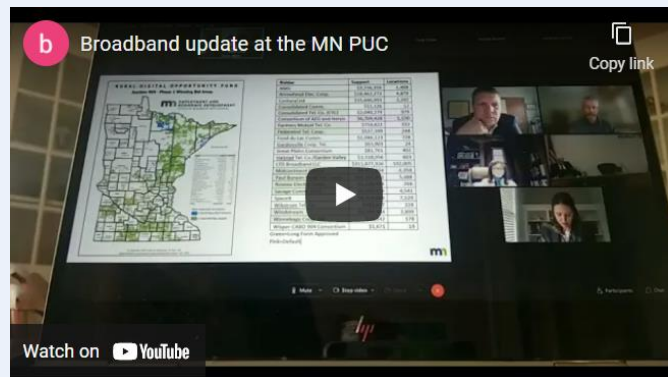
Traffic to the blog site is just one measure of exposure. We also saw an increase in the number of readers who get BoB posts via Twitter, email, or WordPress. During the reporting period, BoB subscribers increased from 2,070 to 2,409, and e-News subscribers increased from 2,487 to 2,757. Subscribers include legislators, journalists, national broadband figures and community members.

Visitors to BoB can share posts with their colleagues through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social media channels. Posts have been shared almost 40,000 times since July 2018.

The [Blandin on Broadband YouTube channel](#) was created in May of 2009. It currently has 78 subscribers and holds 1,867 videos with 37,088 total views.

#### Top Videos:

1. Tour of Somali Computer Center in Willmar
2. The Journey to High-Speed Internet in Rural Minnesota Communities
3. Demo of App Camp app on Native American beading



#### Video Categories:

- Archive of public meetings (Task Force, Legislative, County Commission Conferences)
- Archive of annual broadband conference
- Demonstrations/interviews with grantees
- Videos made by/with grantees
- Zoom archives – including instructional and community gatherings

#### How Do People Use the Videos?

- Public record. First and foremost, the Blandin on Broadband video is often the only recording of public meetings. Policymakers and pundits view them to analyze or confirm what has happened or been said in various meetings. We have heard from people who attended the meeting and were glad for the record; we've heard from people who were not able to attend and were relieved to know there was a record.

### How Do People Use the Videos? (cont.)

- **Storytelling.** The videos have also been a fun way to track cohorts of grantees. They talk about what they plan to do in one of the first meetings; then we track their progress through the initiative and often get “final words” at the end of the project. It’s a great way to see the progress of each community but also to see the elevation of expectations and goals with each cohort.
- **Learning.** Community leaders and policy staff are grateful for the videos as a primer to learn about broadband technology and policy in Minnesota. We hear from new legislative hires about how helpful they are to get oriented to issues, players, and to learn about recent and not so recent broadband history.

## Convenings

Blandin Foundation hosted two annual statewide broadband conferences during the reporting period, with support from the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED)’s Office of Broadband Development. Both were held virtually due to COVID.

Planning for the 2020 conference commenced in January of that year. Staff had selected a venue, and was working toward finalizing a contract, when it became apparent that an in-person gathering would likely be inadvisable. The planning team began to consider what an online conference might look like; how could we deliver similar value to participants, while keeping them engaged over Zoom? The idea emerged:

[Broadband 2020: Connected We Stand](#) was held throughout the month of October of 2020. The event was held online via Zoom, at no charge, and over 150 people registered to attend. Sessions were livestreamed to the Blandin on Broadband YouTube channel and [archived](#) to the Blandin on Broadband blog. Individual sessions archived on Blandin’s Broadband YouTube channel have been viewed between six and sixty-six times.



The unique format featured:

Week 1 (scheduled sessions)	Weeks 2 and 3 (optional, elective programming)	Week 4 (scheduled sessions)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preconference Zoom open house</li> <li>• Three mornings of scheduled activities (Oct 6-8)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital office hours</li> <li>• Broadband 101</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three mornings of scheduled activities (Oct 20-22)</li> </ul>

The conference featured:

- Keynote speakers of national stature:
  - *How I Think About the Importance of Communities in the 21st Century* by Thomas L. Friedman, Author, Reporter, Columnist, New York Times
  - *Connecting Residents to Essential Services: Solutions for Local Communities* by Deb Socia, President and CEO, The Enterprise Center, Chattanooga, TN
  - *Bringing Broadband to Rural America: Opportunities and Challenges Post-Pandemic* by Shirley Bloomfield, CEO, NTCA – The Rural Broadband Association, Arlington, VA
  - *From Digital Infrastructure to Transformation: Leveraging Broadband for Community Economic Development* by Roberto Gallardo, Ph.D., Assistant Director of the Purdue Center for Regional Development and Purdue Extension Community & Regional Economics Specialist
- A day of engagement with the Minnesota Governor’s Task Force on Broadband featuring presentations from Border-to-Border Broadband Development Fund Grantees on the impacts of the State’s investments in infrastructure followed by breakout sessions with Task Force Subcommittees: Economic Development, Barriers, and Minnesota Model.

- Multiple networking opportunities including:
  - Mentor sessions where topic experts were paired with conference participants for small group engagements
  - Digital office hours: optional daily 2-hour Zoom sessions during conference weeks two and three where special guests gave short presentations with discussion to follow.
  - Open Space discussions where participants posed questions or offered to host a discussion with other conference attendees. Topics included digital engagement for refugees and immigrants, library response to the Coronavirus, and the State's interactive speed map.
- Broadband 101: optional daily 1-hour Zoom sessions during conference weeks two and three with experts from around the state and nation on different aspects of broadband infrastructure planning and deployment including community development, building public-private partnerships, feasibility studies, and state and federal funding options.
- Book Club: *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* by Thomas Friedman.

### **Participant Feedback from the Conference**

- "Tom Friedman, hands down the big finish, but all the sessions I was part of were handled very well. The federal programs presentation had the most valuable data for my group."
- "I would scale back to just a few sessions in 1-2 days. The big thing about the in-person meetings were meeting aside from others with people. The chat groups felt like arranged marriages. I've always gotten the best information at the conferences from people who were unlikely to be in my normal circle."
- "Thanks for all your work and pivoting to the virtual format. There were wide ranges of options for joining in and over many days and weeks."
- "This is a tonic for the mind and spirit, thank you so much. I look forward to it every year, and value the colleagues I meet... And thank you for keeping its resources online... Well done!"
- "At first, I wondered why it was four weeks long. Now I understand given the importance of topics covered and how they are all germane to the 'getting broadband' process. Well done!"



With a successful virtual conference in 2020 under our belts, and an uncertain 2021 in the face of COVID, staff made the decision to host another online conference in 2021. Based on 2020 feedback and the general mood of 2021, we shortened the duration substantially to three mornings. Seeking to deepen engagement, the planning team chose to host a series of regional events leading up to the annual statewide conference.

[Building on Broadband: Inspiring Progress](#) was held October 12-14, 2021. Nearly 200 people registered for the three-morning virtual conference and attendance was strong, with between 88 and 111 attendees each day.



**BUILDING ON BROADBAND**  
Inspiring Progress.

The conference featured:

- Welcome and remarks from US Senator Amy Klobuchar
- Presentation and discussion with the author of *Farm Fresh Broadband: The Politics of Rural Connectivity*, Dr. Christopher Ali, Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia and Knight News Innovation Fellow with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University
- Panels each day featuring respondents to a Request for Proposals for conference presenters issued by planners in the months prior to the event. A dozen responses were sorted into three panels by topic: Digital Showcase, Advocacy and Action, and Spreading What works.
- An update on the American Rescue Plan Act's Capital Projects Fund with the Minnesota Office of Broadband Development
- Report outs from a series of eight Regional Gatherings held in the month leading up to the conference hosted by Blandin Foundation in partnership with local hosts.

## **Rural Voices Roll-Up: A synthesis of common themes heard at regional broadband gatherings in MN, fall 2021.**

During the weeks leading up [Building on Broadband: Inspiring Progress](#), Blandin partnered with Minnesota's initiative foundations and regional development commissions to host a series of eight regional broadband gatherings across the state. Our shared goals were to bring new voices to the work and help catalyze the formation of regional teams inspired and equipped to respond to new funding opportunities anticipated as part of the federal government's COVID response and infrastructure investments.

Over 35 staff from nearly 20 partner organizations were involved in planning the eight virtual and hybrid regional gatherings, which were attended by over 300 people in the month prior to the conference. Each gathering was unique, but common themes arose around the greatest opportunities for improving rural broadband access and adoption in Minnesota and what support communities need to seize them. Those themes were summarized by planners and presented to statewide conference participants. In short, across the state, we heard from participants that:

- Local champions are key and need support!
- Communities need to be prepared for when opportunities arise.
- Broadband infrastructure projects benefit from regional collaboration.
- Funding programs need to be attractive to providers while holding them accountable for promised improvements.

For more information on the Regional Gatherings:

- East Central: Region 7E plus Aitkin County – Oct. 6: [Notes and Video](#)
- North Central: Region 5 – Sept. 30: [Notes and Audio](#)
- Northwest & Headwaters: Regions 1, 2 – Sept. 29: [Notes and Video](#)
- Central: Region 7W – Sept. 23: [Notes and Video](#)
- Arrowhead: Region 3 minus Aitkin County – Sept. 22: [Notes and Video](#)
- West Central: Region 4 – Sept. 16: [Notes and Video](#)
- Upper MN Valley, Mid-Minnesota, and Southwest: Regions 6W, 6E, 8 – Sept. 16: [Notes and Video](#)
- Southeast & South Central: Regions 9, 10S – Sept. 16: [Notes and Video](#)

## Middle of the Mountain: Accountability for Impact



**Accountability for Impact**

- Major program evaluations
- External strategic evaluation
- Board survey and feedback
- Grantee Perception Report
- Synthesis of grantees' reports
- Employee surveys

**The BCBP has impacts at multiple levels**

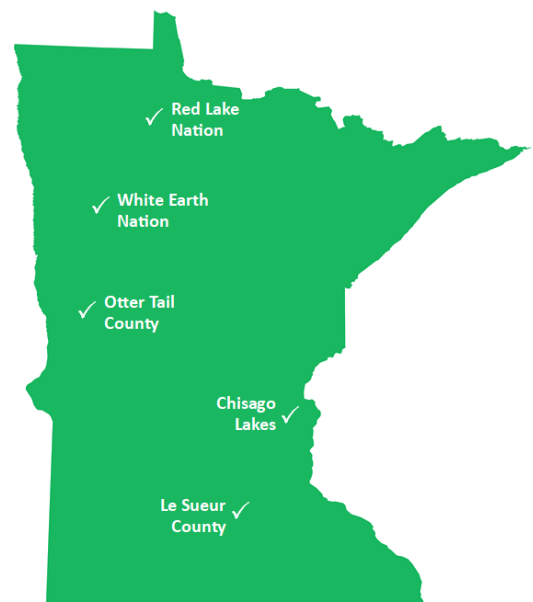
- Individuals
- Grants/Projects/Events
- Businesses/Organizations/Institutions
- Communities
- Regions
- Statewide
- National

### Blandin Broadband Communities

During this reporting period the Foundation worked with two cohorts of BBCs, one winding down and the other just kicking-off in October 2021.

In winter 2020, five new Blandin Broadband Communities (BBCs) were selected, based on applications that demonstrated the prerequisite community commitment of a formally constituted Steering Team of at least eight people representing a diversity of circumstance and lived experience. The cohort included the Chisago Lakes Area, Le Sueur County, Otter Tail County, Red Lake Nation, and White Earth Nation. The cohort was funded by Blandin Foundation, with \$25,000 grant support from West Central Initiative Foundation.

This cohort was launched in February 2020 with what would turn out to be the program's last



in-person event held at Blandin Foundation for quite some time. Our newly formed teams left the meeting with in-person Steering Team Meetings on the calendar for March in each of the participating counties. The COVID-19 pandemic derailed those plans. The cohort was put on hold for a few months as local governments dealt with stay-at-home orders and the impacts to their communities. Staff hoped to be able to continue in-person engagement later in the year, but by summer had decided to redesign and re-launch the BBC work entirely online.

Regrettably, staff was never able successfully to reengage with the Red Lake BBC. Blandin staff and consultants reached out several times via email and Zoom meetings to see how we might help create conditions to allow Red Lake to participate – exploring a modified version of the program. However, between pandemic challenges and Red Lake staff turnover, the decision was made to discontinue their involvement in June of 2021.



In late summer 2021, a gift from The Margaret A. Cargill Foundation Fund at The Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation made it possible for the foundation to recruit another new cohort of BBC communities. Staff launched this newest cohort by October. The 2021 BBC cohort was recruited from those rural MN counties with the highest per capita poverty and/or the poorest broadband access. The six counties that successfully completed the application process are: Austin/Mower County, Big Stone County, Lincoln County, Mahnomon County, Pine County, and Warroad/Roseau County. These six will not be featured in this report, as it isn't expected they will begin implementing projects until January of 2022.

A total of \$300,000 in grants was awarded to fund 21 community projects in the four 2020-21 BBCs over this reporting period, plus one \$1,000 donation for planning support for Le Sueur County.

Each community in this cohort has implemented five to six projects. BBC projects require local match of 25% of the total project cost, or 1:3. Project staff has observed over time that most BBCs greatly surpass minimum required match on their \$75,000 grants. An interesting and unique element to the current BBCs is the influx of federal funding for broadband projects during the cohort period. Le Sueur and Otter Tail counties leveraged CARES dollars to help implement BBC-identified projects.

Finally, as part of the BBC program, the Foundation has awarded grants directly to [PCs for People](#) to supply each community with fifty refurbished computers for distribution to income-qualified residents or nonprofit institutions. The computers come loaded with basic software, including educational resources. Recipients attend brief orientation on the software installed on the computer, learn where they can find discounted internet service, and what they can do if the computer has any problems.



The following summary of BBC community-level impacts is informed by Blandin on Broadband blog reporting, and staff site visits with BBC teams.

### Chisago Lakes Area

The Chisago Lakes Initiative (CLI) is a partnership formed in 2017 under the Initiative Foundation focused on supporting economic revitalization and quality of life in the



area, which is defined by the Chisago Lakes School District boundary in the southern part of the county. It serves as a cohesive voice for the five main municipalities located along the Hwy 8 corridor: Chisago City, Lindstrom, Center City, Shafer, and Taylors Falls. Internet connectivity is a particular challenge to the area, and limits opportunity.



Two of the BBC projects implemented by the CLI team directly address the region's limited broadband access. They purchased forty-five mobile cellular hotspots with unlimited data for community use. The hotspots were offered first to Chisago Lakes School District students who lacked adequate broadband to succeed in at-home learning. Remaining hotspots will be lent to community members through the East Central Regional Library.

The Chisago Lakes team also conducted a community survey to gather data on current internet satisfaction levels and unmet needs; and promoted the Minnesota Speed Test initiative. They will use this data to help them talk with providers, community leaders, and legislators about broadband infrastructure needs across the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit seniors especially hard, greatly limiting social interactions. Another project sought to provide devices and training to older adults, so they have a

comfortable and safe way to learn and socialize. Classes covered a variety of topics such as videoconference platforms, email, google and iCloud, social media, and more.

The school district, HRA-EDA, cable commission, and local manufacturers teamed up to produce virtual manufacturing tours to expand students' exposure to technology and manufacturing as a career choice in the time of COVID. In-person tours have been offered to students for several years, but that isn't as feasible now. Students will be able to the videos in school and then connected with the business via videoconference to ask questions and get a feel for the culture of the workplace. Originally the team had hoped to produce eight video tours, but because of scheduling difficulties and greater than anticipated production time they have narrowed it down to five - of which three are complete. All will be available for viewing on the Chamber's [website](#).

Finally, the Chisago Lakes Area sought to showcase local businesses with a new [website](#) for the Chisago Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce. The new website is easier to navigate and includes a data management system to provide higher value to the membership and community at large.

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“This Blandin grant has given us is an opportunity to move and to do big, cool things for our community, despite all the noise and all the nonsense that’s happening outside of our doors. I am so appreciative for that because I feel right now is a time people are leaning into desperation in a lot of ways...We’ve been able to move forward, be unstuck in a very stuck time...which has made coming to work a lot of fun... thank you... you gave us the WD-40 we needed this past year.”

- **Katie Malchow**  
Executive Director  
Chisago Lakes Area  
Chamber of Commerce

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## Le Sueur County



Le Sueur County has been working with the Foundation on broadband for several years, a connection first sparked in 2018 at a regional broadband summit Blandin helped facilitate for Region 9 Economic Development Commission. Blandin's initial support to Le Sueur included grant funding for a Robust Network Feasibility Study and staffing support to move projects forward. An

early result of the study was a 2019 DEED Border-to-Border grant for almost \$2 million (matched 1:1 locally) to upgrade service to 417 households, 88 farms, 59 businesses, and four anchor institutions (all unserved) in rural areas around the communities of Montgomery, Heidelberg, and New Prague.

This work positioned county broadband champions for a successful BBC effort, focused mainly on communications, public access and training, and addressing broadband-enabled economic development opportunities. The Steering Committee has remained focused on their goal to increase broadband access/adoption/use by implementing projects designed to increase the technical capacity of residents through training and through better high-speed access through public hotspots, loaner devices and advocating more highspeed internet throughout the county.

Le Sueur County maximized the impact of their BBC resources by utilizing CARES funding to implement projects identified through the BBC process. The first project funded in part with the help of CARES dollars sought to improve access to technology throughout the county by increasing the number of public access sites and offering new training opportunities, with an emphasis on Zoom and similar applications that support community connectivity.

Two other CARES-funded projects were communications focused. One amplified the work of the Le Sueur County Broadband Initiative (LCBI) through enhanced communication and marketing, including improving access to county-wide calendars, and offering integrated community education classes. A fun component of this project was a Broadband booth at the 2020 Le Sueur County Fair. The booth's materials, signage, survey,

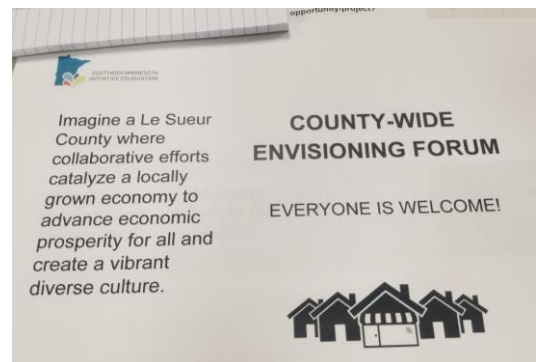
**Broadband and Technology**

- 49% Internet Access
- Expanding broadband & Wireless Coverage
- Stable Access Network Creation

and volunteers generated much discussion and interest in broadband planning efforts around the county. Fair-goers noted and appreciated the brand-new free Wi-Fi on the fairgrounds, which greatly enhanced their fair-going experience. The second communications-focused project was the purchase of Google Suites for Business for LCBI, including training for all team members.

In an effort to explain how and why the county spent CARES Act dollars, the impacts of the investments -- and assure residents that the County is committed to making broadband available to all -- the team created a video: [Le Sueur County: the County that CARES about Broadband](#). The video premiered in October and so far has been shown at county board and department meetings. It will be posted on the county's website and shown to townships. Additional segments with emergency services and human services focuses will be available soon.

Another project addressed the lack of economic development at the county-level. LCBI, in partnership with Southern Minnesota Initiative Fund, hosted a community asset mapping workshop to identify opportunities for collaboration, and spur innovative ideas across the county – not just in cities – on how to best utilize the unprecedented levels of federal funding expected in the coming months.



The meeting was timely and fruitful, involving over sixty people, including county and township officials, staff from cities across the county, regional intermediary agencies, business leaders, and educators. Meetings between LCBI and city administrators and elected officials to discuss their capacity for economic development work followed. They learned that only two cities in the county have full time staff dedicated to economic development. All supported the concept of the county stepping in to support their economic development work. This culminated with a presentation to the Le Sueur County board in October with a recommendation to hire a county-wide economic development director. The board unanimously supported moving in this direction.

Another project to increase staff support for LCBI fizzled, through no fault of the team. They had planned to welcome a Lead for Minnesota Fellow to work on broadband in partnership with Tri City School District, but the identified fellow dropped out of the program. The team continues to work on alternatives.

Between CARES funding and the Fellow not working out, at the time of this writing Le Sueur County has around \$50,000 Blandin funds left to allocate. The team is planning a



“relaunch” event in December 2021 including a revamp of the steering committee due to changes in personnel in the schools and at the county, bringing in new voices. They anticipate communications continuing to be a major focus moving ahead. They anticipate completing their BBC work in 2022.

### **Impact of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF)**

The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund is an FCC program designed to bring high-speed fixed broadband service to rural homes and small businesses that lack it. The Phase I reverse auction ended on November 25, 2020 and winners committed to bring broadband to over five million homes and businesses in census blocks that were entirely unserved by voice and broadband with download speeds of at least 25 Mbps. The FCC is currently in the process of going through long-form applications and making final award decisions. Once formally awarded, winning providers have six years to complete the projects.

One wireless provider won over three quarters of the over \$400 million awarded to Minnesota in the auction phase. The FCC is still considering whether to approve their long-form application.

This has left large swaths of the state in a holding pattern, including Le Sueur County. LCBI team leader Barbara Dröher Kline has been a vocal advocate for communities affected by the uncertainty of the RDOF auction. She spoke with MinnPost in January 2021:

Barbara Dröher Kline, a broadband consultant working with Le Sueur County, said the county had applications rejected by the state for two broadband projects for roughly 500 homes in areas that could potentially be served by LTD. Both are next to parts of the county where the county and other partners built fiber infrastructure with \$547,000 from the federal stimulus CARES Act.

Dröher Kline said about two-thirds of eligible areas in Le Sueur County are now covered by LTD’s winning bids, which means they may get broadband, but it also may take years. She suggested the state ask the feds to withdraw RDOF funding in areas where the state program can build infrastructure quickly. “It would have been a drop in the bucket (for LTD) and we’d have fiber in the ground this spring,” Droher Kline said.

As of November 2021, the final award decision has still not been made, and communities wait. Barbara laments, “It feels like we’re going backward.”

## Otter Tail County

**Erin Smith**, Otter Tail County BBC team member and Director of the Viking Library System, had this to say about her BBC experience during a meeting with Foundation staff in April 2021:

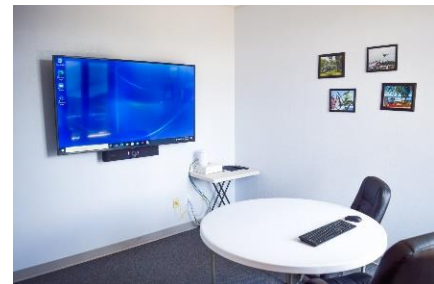
“During this past year broadband and these tools are how people have stayed connected. It’s so imperative that everyone has that opportunity – [both] during the pandemic and going forward too. I just think there’s a lot of purpose and meaning to the work... it’s been a bright spot!”

Indeed, as the pandemic took hold in 2020, participants in the county’s visioning process identified as priorities getting broadband access to families and individuals without (through subsidized services, public Wi-Fi), enhancements to help kids be successful in the distant-learning environment imposed due to COVID, and public education around why broadband is important to everyone in the county – for schools, healthcare, attracting and retaining businesses, and more.



The Otter Tail County team implemented a number of projects to redress equity issues that came to light due to the COVID pandemic. For example, the county distributed one hundred Tech Packs to residents impacted by the pandemic. The packs contained a laptop computer, wireless hotspot device with six months of prepaid internet service, and digital resources for jobseekers from CareerForce. This project was identified through the BBC visioning process, but the County primarily used CARES funding to pay for it, extending the reach of the overall BBC effort. Of the tech-pack recipients, 54% reported not having internet access at home.

Two other projects were identified through the BBC program but funded by CARES. The first was Smart Rooms – six indoor public meeting spaces with audiovisual equipment for use for job interviews, virtual meetings, distance learning, and more. The rooms are located at four public libraires, the Battle Lake City Hall, and the City of Vergas Event Center. More spaces may be identified and funded with Blandin dollars.



New public Wi-Fi access was made available in four locations: Battle Lake Public School parking lots, Underwood School activity buses, Kirkbride Park in Fergus Falls, and downtown New York Milles. More locations are being explored.

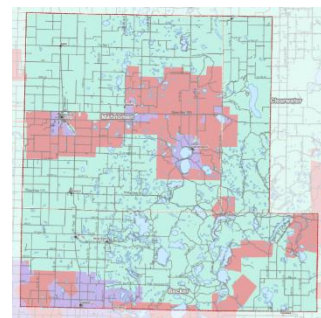


Two projects implemented address knowledge workforce. The first was a Virtual Career Fair and additional STEAM offerings in summer childcare programs. In previous years Greater Fergus Falls and the School District hosted in-person career fair to introduce students to local career opportunities. Shifting the fair to a virtual format actually allowed them to expand to six businesses outside the Fergus Falls area and expanded marketing efforts county-wide. The STEAM element allowed Fergus Falls YMCA to expand coding education and other technology education offerings. Also, Perham Boys & Girls Club added coding robots to their programming, and they explored digital media and arts in other kids' programming. Another project focused on improving business resilience through technology by offering technology audits to local small businesses, and then using what they learned to provide specialized learning opportunities for participating businesses.

The Otter Tail County team made good use of the fifty PCs for People computers provided by Blandin Foundation. They targeted senior citizens and families receiving human services assistance. They purchased webcams to complement the computers and offered tech support and digital literacy resources.

## White Earth Nation

White Earth Nation is the largest reservation in Minnesota. The broadband situation across the reservation is uneven. While nearly 90% of residents have access to fixed, non-mobile broadband that meets the 2026 state speed goal of 100 MBPS download and 20 MBPS upload, there is a broad swath across the middle of the reservation that is un- or underserved (red in the figure to the left.) Cellular service is also a concern across the reservation.



The Steering Team's focus was increasing Wi-Fi access across the reservation and getting devices and internet connections to those who need it most, which they deemed to be families with students, and elders.

The team instituted an elder lending program to provide devices and mobile hotspot access to older residents on an as-needed basis, with recipients being allowed to check

out the devices for several weeks at a time. Along with the device lending, digital navigation services are provided on topics such as telemedicine, online classes or meetings, and social engagement.

The lending program for students and families focuses primarily on internet hotspots rather than devices, since younger people often have device access through schools or cell phones. The hotspots allow students access for schoolwork. Families living in tribally owned and operated housing units were given priority.



Public access projects include installing Wi-Fi hotspots in communities to provide safe and secure locations for residents to access the internet and installing cell signal boosters in communities with poor cell service. They will also install televisions in White Earth

Public Transit buses to improve communications across the reservation, including announcements, daily information, and marketing of community events.

## Infrastructure Advancements

Thanks to sophisticated and adept use of CARES fund dollars, working in partnership with Blandin and private sector Internet Service Providers, three of the four communities in the 2020 BBC cohort have achieved significant progress on broadband deployment:

- Le Sueur County worked with multiple broadband providers to install a main fiber line bisecting the county connecting multiple communities for both public and private sector use; they provided grants to private sector ISPs to extend fiber to the home networks in rural unserved areas; and they entered into a public-private partnership to provide fiber-fed fixed wireless services to additional unserved areas.
- Otter Tail County provided CARES funds to private broadband providers to extend fiber to the home networks more widely across the county.
- By engaging unserved townships and pursuing state broadband grants, Chisago Lakes Area has benefitted from significant expansion by an existing provider in several area townships.

## Arrowhead Intelligent Region initiative

Launched in the fall of 2020 in partnership with IRRR and Northland Foundation, the [Arrowhead Intelligent Region](#) (AIR) initiative brought together northeastern Minnesota economic and community developers to identify and fund projects across the seven-county Arrowhead region to:

- Improve broadband infrastructure
- Build a knowledge workforce
- Incent innovation
- Ensure digital equality
- Enable community engagement
- Ensure environmental and social sustainability



This approach combines an understanding that broadband is essential infrastructure, while emphasizing that communities’ use of broadband drives economic competitiveness. It builds on and brings to regional scale the Intelligent Community framework used by ten Iron Range communities to develop and implement projects that deliver on the promise of a broadband-fueled economy.

To identify opportunities and projects to fund, Blandin and Intelligent Community Forum staff spent the final quarter of 2020 collecting and compiling information for a benchmarking exercise that compares the Arrowhead Region to more than 400 communities around the globe on the framework’s elements - infrastructure, workforce, innovation, digital equity, community engagement, and sustainability: [Arrowhead Region Analytics Data Form](#).

Each element was graded on a 100-point scale:

ICF Element	Arrowhead Region	International
Broadband	95	81
Knowledge Workforce	79	79
Innovation	45	77
Digital Equity	62	67
Sustainability	69	78
Engagement	84	84

Much to the consternation of initiative participants, the Arrowhead Region ranks quite high for broadband against other communities around the world. This is not to say that the region has above average broadband. ICF awards some points based on quantitative measures, others on qualitative. Points are awarded on the cost of broadband per megabyte, for planning efforts, regional collaboration, best practices, etc. So, some assets contributing to the Arrowhead region's broadband score would include the affordable [GigaZone](#) service from Paul Bunyan Communications, Northeast Service Cooperative's middle-mile [network](#), and the Iron Range Blandin Broadband Community planning efforts. Therefore, the region scored high despite the fact there are large unserved areas.

Two rounds of AIR grants were awarded in 2021 totaling \$545,130 for fourteen projects that improve broadband infrastructure and technology-driven economic competitiveness using the Intelligent Community framework. *See the appendix for a complete list of AIR grants.*

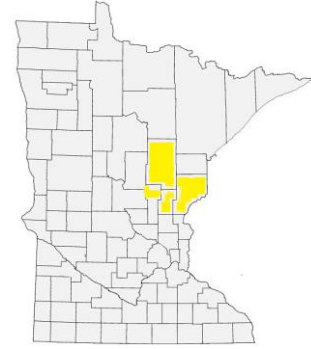
## **Technical Assistance: Meeting Communities Where They Are At**

### **Community Broadband Resources: *Accelerate!***

In spring of 2020, foundation staff was planning to host a three-day in-person Broadband Leadership Workshop at foundation headquarters. The goal of this new intensive program was to help local broadband champions acquire the skills and knowledge they need to attract broadband infrastructure investments in their communities that support economic development and community vitality. Eight teams from around the state expressed interest in attending.

COVID both exacerbated the need for *Accelerate!* and made an in-person workshop impossible. Blandin's broadband team scrambled to redesign the program so it could be delivered virtually as a fourteen-week intensive hands-on course.

Four communities from poorly served east central Minnesota submitted qualifying applications to participate in the initial cohort: Aitkin County, Kanabec County, Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures, and Pine County. The *Accelerate!* program included:



- Facilitated weekly meetings.
- Leadership education via archived webinars, expert presentations, and peer group discussions.
- Information gathering including community surveys, broadband provider interviews, and community meetings.
- Step by step broadband planning to:
  - Develop a broadband vision.
  - Understand the local marketplace.
  - Determine appropriate technologies.
  - Consider alternative broadband provider partnerships models and prospective broadband provider partners.
  - Identify and seek available funding resources.

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“The pandemic has made clear how vital broadband is to the lives of Minnesotans and to the economic vitality of our state,” said DEED Commissioner **Steve Grove**. “These grants will help communities fund broadband and other important projects as we write the next chapter of our economy.”

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"Without the knowledge and connections made through Blandin's broadband program this couldn't have happened!"

- **Lezlie Sauter**, Economic Development Director, Pine County

"Thank YOU, Bill, Bernadine and Mary. This would not have been possible without the guidance and learning that we received from you."

- **Mark Jeffers**, Economic Development Coordinator, Aitkin County

"I think we've turned the corner and I think our attitude here across the board is positive now. That's the biggest thing. Thank you, Blandin and everybody, for everything. It's really been a lot of fun. I look forward to seeing what comes out of all of this."

- **Heidi Steinmetz**, Kanabec County EDA

*Accelerate!* program participation helped Aitkin and Pine counties prepare to apply for Small Cities Coronavirus Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG-CV), administered by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. As part of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), Minnesota received a special allocation to address community needs to prevent, prepare for, and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including broadband projects. Aitkin County received \$4,823,654 for broadband improvements. Pine County received \$3,743,390 – mostly for broadband improvements.

## **Community Broadband Resources Program**

Communities struggling with substandard broadband services want to know: 1) where they stand with broadband compared to other communities, and 2) their options for moving forward.

Blandin’s broadband program offers foundation support along a continuum of community readiness as capacity is built through shared learning and action. Community Broadband Resources (CBR) is the open-end of the funnel. CBR is designed to meet communities “where they are at,” with assistance requested ranging from technical, educational, or informational, to convening and facilitation support. CBR is available upon completion of a simple online form with community engagement beginning almost immediately.

CBR participants often “graduate” to participating in the foundation’s more intensive broadband programming. For example, the 2021 Blandin Broadband Communities cohort includes two communities - Austin and Pine counties – which previously had taken advantage of CBR assistance. Carlton (Cloquet is county seat) and Redwood County have also received Robust Network Feasibility Fund (RNFF) Study grants. CBR “graduates” that have deepened their engagement with the foundation through participation in the *Accelerate!* program include Redwood, Benton, northwest Todd counties, and the City of Cloquet. In almost all cases, once communities have taken advantage of CBR they continue to look to the foundation for information and support, subscribe to the broadband blog, join the Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition, and attend state and regional broadband events.

The twenty communities that sought out CBR resources during this reporting period include cities, counties, and tribal governments. While significant resources were devoted to communities in northeastern Minnesota, from the Duluth suburbs to the Iron Range to northern Saint Louis County, interest in better broadband is a statewide rural phenomenon.



Supporting the creation of an informed and motivated leadership team including multiple community champions is the key objective of CBR. Blandin provides training, usually beginning with a “Broadband 101” presentation that includes general information about broadband technology terms, defining characteristics and trends, and a high-level analysis of existing area broadband infrastructure and services. Best community practices for improving broadband services are highlighted as well as “most likely” paths forward.

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“You guys, as Blandin, have done a great job at educating I think the whole state on the value of broadband and bringing us all together...as part of the solution... Bringing us together with the right officials and then get that champion to get the whole process moving forward.”

- **David Schornack**

Director of Business

Development and Sales

Arvig

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CBR also guides communities through their information gathering process. This usually involves creating a list of existing and prospective providers which are invited for community interviews as to their existing capabilities or planned improvements. Discussions generally focus on identifying what conditions would motivate a provider to invest in the community.

Providing an online survey tool that generates a data report – and help interpreting the data – is often helpful to communities. Blandin provides sample surveys and an online portal for data collection and analysis. The task of promoting the survey within the community builds the local team and the provided survey results provide quick feedback on the local broadband situation and market information to take to potential provider partners.

Generally, a community broadband summit is held to receive additional community input about their broadband experience, review the gathered information from the survey, provider interviews and available broadband data. These meetings can provide motivation to the broadband team leaders, inform more community members, add additional broadband volunteers, and empower elected leaders to pursue private sector broadband investment in tandem with public sector financial commitments. With the pandemic, these meetings have moved online despite the irony of needing broadband to participate in meetings focused on poor broadband!

CBR participants can often make great progress on their broadband quest in a relatively short time. For example, the following communities participating in CBR during this reporting period recently received state or federal broadband infrastructure grants that will be deployed in 2020-21:

- Le Sueur/BevComm - state grant
- Central Iron Range/Cherry Township - USDA ReConnect grant
- Koochiching County/Paul Bunyan (also BBC) - state grant
- Scandia/Midco - state grant

A complete list of Blandin-enabled broadband projects that have successfully applied for public funding during this reporting period starts on page 38.

The thirty-two hours of assistance available per community through CBR seems adequate; communities averaged twenty-seven hours of requested assistance.

Below is a summary of the 460 hours of assistance delivered to participating communities and entities during the 2020-21 reporting period.

Community	Assistance Description	Highlights
<p><b>Central Iron Range Feasibility Study</b></p>	<p>Continued ad hoc advice to key leaders of this regional initiative</p>	<p>In addition to the successful Cherry project, the area has seen additional broadband grant funded projects for last mile networks by area ISPs. The area has also just received notice of a successful EDA grant application by NESC to build additional middle mile network and expanded services to opportunity zones in Hibbing and Virginia.</p>
<p><b>LTE East Range Feasibility Study</b></p>	<p>Serve as advisor to this diverse group of broadband activists through consultant solicitation, consultant selection and</p>	<p>Feasibility study completed and multiple projects under development and applications submitted for funding.</p>

Community	Assistance Description	Highlights
<b>City of Cloquet</b>	Provided significant technical assistance to the City of Cloquet Broadband Task Force.	Provided presentations, maps, and analysis to the City of Cloquet Task Force. The City is now participating in the Community Broadband Resources: <i>Accelerate!</i> program.
<b>Benton County</b>	Provide leadership education and a broadband overview to staff members of Benton County.	Benton County is now a participant in the Community Broadband Resources: <i>Accelerate!</i> program. They are also conducting a feasibility study funded by the County
<b>Todd County</b>	Conduct research and make presentation to key community leaders in NW Todd County	Joint powers group created in NW Todd County to address broadband shortcomings. Group is now participating in the Community Broadband Resources: <i>Accelerate!</i> Program.
<b>Mower County</b>	Attend Austin/Mower County broadband steering team meetings and provide information about existing broadband services and infrastructure. Help the group to shift to a focus on digital equity and broadband use.	Area provider committed to build FTTH network within Austin community. Austin/Mower County now participating in the Blandin Broadband Communities program.
<b>Rice Lake</b>	Provided leadership education and broadband overview to city staff, council members and citizens of Rice Lake (northwest of Duluth). The City followed up by receiving a small RNFF grant to conduct an engineering study.	Maintain occasional contact with the community which is continuing discussions with CTC on next steps. They have also begun working with a coalition of suburban/exurban Duluth Communities on collaborative opportunities.

Community	Assistance Description	Highlights
<b>Fine Lakes Township</b>	Offer ad hoc guidance to township officials	Presentation by CTC.
<b>Crane Lake</b>	Made a presentation to the Crane Lake Community.	Unclear.
<b>Minnetrista</b>	Prepare maps and provide presentation.	Unclear.
<b>Pine County</b>	Ad hoc assistance and presentation made to key stakeholders.	Pine County participated in <i>Accelerate!</i> ; now a Blandin Broadband Community. Received a \$3+ million broadband grant via Small Cities Coronavirus Community Development Block Grant Program.
<b>Wright County</b>	Provided leadership education and broadband overview to an ad hoc community coalition.	Wright County has escalated the importance of broadband.
<b>Saint Louis County</b>	Discussions with county staff about broadband strategy options.	County launched a community broadband planning grant with intention of using federal ARPA dollars to support resulting projects.
<b>Waseca County</b>	Provided leadership education and broadband overview.	Unsure of status.
<b>Northeast Service Cooperative</b>	Serve on a project ideation and grant development team for expansion of their middle mile network and economic development support capacity.	NESC recently notified of a successful \$3.4 million dollar grant award from EDA for this project.

Community	Assistance Description	Highlights
<b>Northern Brainerd Lakes Area community collaborative</b>	Provide on-occasion guidance to the joint group of mayors/community representatives on broadband expansion.	The incumbent provider committed to extensive broadband infrastructure improvements.
<b>Northern Anoka County</b>	Provide assistance to county economic development staff and local elected officials. Provide research and presentation to a northern Anoka County broadband summit.	Multiple projects resulted in better broadband services in portions of northern and rural portions of Anoka County.
<b>Norman County</b>	Provide leadership education to county, city and township officials. Facilitate conversation with incumbent provider.	Provider and community developed shared opportunity to ensure quality broadband to the Ada business community.
<b>Southern MN Schools Broadband Inquiry</b>	Conduct and share an analysis of broadband availability and issues for a regional collaboration of southeast and south-central MN school districts.	Presentation well-received.
<b>Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe</b>	Leech Lake Band requested assistance with a federal grant application.	Conducted interviews and facilitated discussion of tribal division heads and key stakeholders to surface issues and opportunities; reviewed grant application drafts and offered feedback. Grant application was submitted, and the Band is awaiting notification.

## Building Community Capacity for Broadband Funding Success

Four of the thirty-nine awardees in the 2020 round of state Border-to-Border grants benefited from Blandin’s community broadband development assistance, from community leadership education and facilitation to broadband feasibility studies (an essential component of any broadband infrastructure grant program). Our program processes prepare community leaders to actively and smartly engage and partner with existing and prospective broadband providers. Our BBCs, through a two-year engagement process, recognize both the value of broadband and the negative impacts of being under/un-served. These communities build significant momentum in support of broadband deployment projects.

The percentage of Blandin-benefitted communities receiving funding is down from 2019 when nine of thirty grants received Blandin assistance. Four of the 2019 Border to Border-funded projects were located in northeast Minnesota, where Blandin and IRRR have been partnering to promote broadband since 2016. Several more were in the east central region of the state where Blandin has been active for a number of years. One of the Office of Broadband’s considerations when awarding grants is geographic parity, so it is thought that they looked to other regions where Blandin’s involvement hasn’t been as focused in 2020. The following chart describes the broadband infrastructure projects receiving state funding in 2020 in which Blandin played a role.

Community	2020 Border-to-Border Broadband grant award details	BCBP Involvement
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Aitkin County</b></p>	<p><b>Mille Lacs Energy Cooperative (MLEC) – Mille Lacs Energy Cooperative Phase 4 FTTH</b></p> <p>This fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) project will serve 80 unserved and five underserved locations along the southeast side of Farm Island Lake in Aitkin County. Through a funding partnership with the State of Minnesota, MLEC will bring 1 Gbps speeds to 84 homes and one business on the fiber route, exceeding the State’s 2022 and 2026 speed goals. With access to a high-quality dependable communications infrastructure, residents in the project area will realize expanded educational, economic and healthcare opportunities.</p> <p><b>Total eligible cost is \$441,350</b>  <b>Local match is \$242,743   DEED Grant is \$198,607</b></p>	<p>Aitkin County was an active participant in first cohort of Iron Range Broadband Communities. In 2015-16 they participated with the Central Woodlands BBC. They continued to work toward better broadband in 2021’s CBR: <i>Accelerate!</i></p>

Community	2020 Border-to-Border Broadband grant award details	BCBP Involvement
<p><b>Meeker County</b></p>	<p><b>Meeker Cooperative Light &amp; Power Association (Vibrant Broadband) – Lake Koronis</b></p> <p>This last mile project will serve approximately 28 unserved and seven underserved locations in Union Grove Township in Meeker County. In a funding partnership with the State of Minnesota, Meeker Cooperative will improve speed levels to 100 Mbps download and 20 Mbps upload, meeting or exceeding Minnesota’s 2022 and 2026 state speed goals. Building a fiber-to-the-premise (FTTP) high-speed broadband services network will provide households, businesses and farms in the project area with access to e-learning, telemedicine, precision agriculture tools, as well as other critical applications.</p> <p><b>The total eligible cost is \$139,757</b>  <b>Local match is \$97,830   DEED grant is \$41,927</b></p>	<p>Meeker County received a Robust Network Feasibility Study grant leading to an entry into broadband services by Meeker Cooperative Light &amp; Power.</p>
<p><b>Scandia</b></p>	<p><b>Midco (Midcontinent Communications) – Scandia</b></p> <p>This last mile project will serve 78 underserved households and one underserved business in remote neighborhoods of Scandia in Washington County. In a funding partnership with the State of Minnesota and City of Scandia, Midco will improve broadband service levels to symmetrical 5 Gbps speeds, exceeding the State’s 2022 and 2026 speed goals. By providing high-speed broadband services in the Scandia area, this project improves access to critical school e-learning and telehealth and will stimulate a more robust local economy.</p> <p><b>Total eligible cost is \$434,144</b>  <b>Local match is \$355,320   DEED Grant is \$78,824</b></p>	<p>Scandia received assistance through the Community Broadband Resources Program and a RNFF grant.</p>

Community	2020 Border-to-Border Broadband grant award details	BCBP Involvement
Cook	<p><b>Paul Bunyan Communications – City of Cook GigaZone Fiber</b></p> <p>This last mile project will improve high-speed broadband for 57 unserved and 254 underserved locations in the community of Cook in St. Louis County. In a funding partnership with the State of Minnesota and City of Cook, Paul Bunyan Communications will improve broadband service levels up to 1 Gbps download and 1 Gbps upload, exceeding the 2022 and 2026 state speed goals for homes, businesses, and community facilities in the project area. The project will enable businesses to take advantage of online resources, including training, marketing, and business support services. In addition, it will increase quality of life and economic opportunity for all residents by providing new avenues to pursue education, employment, healthcare, social life, and entertainment.</p> <p><b>Total eligible project cost is \$691,675</b>  <b>Local match is \$380,421   DEED grant is \$311,254</b></p>	<p>The City of Cook was an active participant in the first cohort of Iron Range Broadband Communities via the Grizzlies (Bois Forte, Cook, Orr).</p>



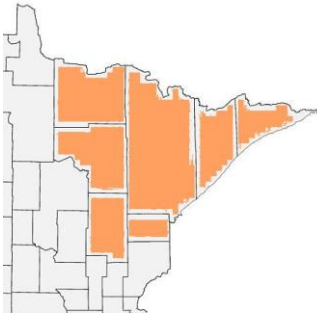
## Organizational-Level Impacts

Thanks in part to years of engagement with Blandin Foundation, members of the Le Sueur County BBC Steering Team were empowered to convene the public and meet with local government staff and elected officials to talk about and promote broadband-based economic development. The result of their hard work and these conversations is a commitment by the County Board to hire an economic development professional to coordinate efforts at the county-level. This is a major win for the team, and for the community as a whole.

In the summer of 2021, Redwood County (a 2015-16 BBC) used a Blandin grant to help support the hire of a Lead for Minnesota Fellow to work on broadband. The Redwood County team hoped this assistance would increase their capacity to develop a broadband implementation that engages community residents, providers, civic leaders and leverages state/federal resources. The team's goal for their two-year fellow:

- Develop a broadband needs assessment for the county, which captures quantitative and qualitative data demonstrating the importance of broadband connection for the County
- Establish/source a map outlining the existing fiber connections, provider areas, expansion opportunities, and gaps
- Build comprehensive public awareness and excitement among county residents to advocate for broadband investment to the county
- Ensure Redwood County is well positioned to successfully compete for state and federal investment into broadband.

## Regional Impacts



The Foundation’s broadband work continues to have impacts at a regional scale. Particularly in northeast Minnesota where IRRR and Blandin partnered to bring the Arrowhead Intelligent Region initiative to the seven-county area, on top of ongoing engagement with the ten Iron Range Blandin Broadband Communities from the past five years. *(See page 29 for more information on AIR)*

Another intentional effort to spur collaboration around broadband at the regional level was the Regional Gatherings component of the 2021 broadband conference. In September and October of 2021, eight regional meetings were held around the state to foster conversation and motivate action around broadband. *(See page 18 for more information)*

While the gatherings didn’t necessarily move the needle on any projects immediately, it was widely thought that they re-elevated the conversation, which is a win in itself. Regional hosts cataloged the following examples:

- “Lots of follow-up meetings, particularly with indigenous communities about how to tap into funding mechanisms.”  
**Antonio Franklin**, HRDC
- “It was awesome to be able to host a regional broadband event.”  
Said co-collaborator **Elissa Hansen**. Hansen reported that as a result of the Arrowhead regional summit the number of collaborators on the region’s Build Back Better EDA grant application grew from three to thirteen. *(see page 47 for more information)* Additionally, new citizen broadband champions were identified.

“What I would encourage is for every county or region to have a strong broadband committee. I can’t tell you how important it is.”

- **Michelle Marotzke**  
Economic Development  
Professional  
Mid-Minnesota Development  
Commission

- In East Central Minnesota, state senators and representatives took notice, and US Senator Smith visited the region to talk about broadband<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, the first cohort of CBR: *Accelerate!* resulted in increased regional collaboration *(See page 30 for more information)*

<sup>2</sup> <https://blandinonbroadband.org/2021/10/23/senator-smiths-broadband-roundtable-in-kandiyohi-county/>

## Statewide Impact

### Governor's Broadband Task Force

In late 2019, the Walz administration announced it was seeking applications for a reconstituted Governor's Broadband Task Force to include an increased number of seats for rural and tribal communities, a change urged by Blandin Foundation at the beginning of that year. Bernadine applied, and was appointed, along with two other members of Blandin Foundation's Broadband Strategy Board:



- **Marc Johnson**, Executive Director of ECMECC – East Central MN Educational Cable Cooperative, and Blandin Broadband Strategy Board member.
- **Jim Weikum**, Mayor of Biwabik and Executive Director of Arrowhead Library System, Blandin Broadband Strategy Board member and IRBC participant.

These appointments significantly strengthen rural voice on the new task force.

In late 2021, to help inform its annual report and recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature, the Task Force invited a presentation summarizing outcomes from Blandin's regional and statewide broadband conference and convenings. Conference planning team member Benya Kraus of Lead for Minnesota [presented the findings](#).

### Bringing Rural Perspectives to Decision Makers

The Blandin on Broadband blog (BoB) continues to be a powerful tool for informing Minnesota's statewide broadband conversation and policy making decisions impacting broadband access and adoption. Among its services to Minnesota's broadband policy community, BoB provides the only coverage of Minnesota Broadband Task Force meetings and all legislative hearings on broadband. At a recent Minnesota PUC meeting, PUC Commissioner John Tuma expressed appreciation for the blog as a comprehensive resource for staying abreast of broadband news.

During this reporting period Blandin staff was invited to speak about rural broadband needs and opportunities to a number of statewide policymaking bodies and advocacy organizations, including the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission, the Governor's Council for an Age-Friendly Minnesota, the Minnesota Association of Townships, Iron Range Economic Alliance, Range Area Municipalities and Schools, and the Economic Development Association of Minnesota.

## Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition

First convened by the Foundation in 2015, during this reporting period the Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition continued to deliver statewide impacts that benefit rural communities through its advocacy as a voice for rural perspectives in state policy deliberations.



Between January 2020 and November 2021, the coalition raised \$82,200 from 69 contributors in addition to a \$30,000 grant from Blandin Foundation<sup>3</sup>.

The Coalition's 4<sup>th</sup> annual Broadband Day on the Hill was held March 12, 2020. A 5<sup>th</sup> virtual Day on the Hill was held the morning of March 24, 2021.

The Coalition undertook a strategic planning process in 2021 that resulted in adoption of a new membership structure designed to better support the organization into the future. The MRBC Governance Structure was also more clearly defined through the strategic planning process, and now includes an Executive Committee, Membership/Development Committee, Legislative Committee, and Marketing and Communications Committee. New leaders stepped up for a smooth leadership transition from the founding team.

The question of just broadband is available and at what service levels can be controversial. State broadband maps are created using broadband provider data, oftentimes provided at the census block area. The result is a general overstatement of broadband availability. Broadband speed tests are one way that communities can demonstrate this inaccuracy. The data is used by local and state officials to help inform consequential decisions about what kind of infrastructure to build, and where. Through the Blandin-sponsored LTE (Laurentian, Tower, East Range) feasibility study process, a speed test initiative was implemented in Saint Louis County, led by Range Area Municipalities and Schools (RAMS) and the various school districts. This initiative was so successful that the Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition wanted to bring the speed test statewide.

The Foundation awarded a \$20,000 grant to the Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition (via Southwest Regional Development Commission) for this purpose, and recruited other foundations to donate as well, and by August of 2020 the effort to bring the Minnesota crowd-sourced Speed Test Initiative statewide was underway.

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<sup>3</sup> The MRBC is aware that the \$30,000 operating support for 2020-21 will be their final grant from Blandin Foundation. In 2022 Blandin Foundation will begin supporting MRBC through membership dues.

The coalition hired a project manager, administrative support, and outreach coordinator to oversee the project. Tens of thousands of speed tests were taken across the state, giving participating communities data to help them partner with ISPs to expand broadband networks in their region.

The Coalition had a successful year at the Legislature, bringing home \$70 million for the state's Border-to-Border Broadband Grant Program and fending off various policy initiatives that would have weakened the state's rigorous grant program.

Looking ahead: In the immediate wake of the passage of the historic Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Coalition staff reflected about the organization's role in the months ahead, telling foundation staff: "The good news is that the federal government just invested the largest sum--\$42.5 billion--in decades, and at least \$100 million will be coming to Minnesota and likely more on top of that. We intend to be at the Legislature to secure every cent that Minnesota can receive for broadband funding and ensure it is spent in ways that help rural communities."

### [Partnership for a ConnectedMN](#)

In response to a request from Governor Walz, in early 2020 Blandin Foundation stepped forward to help establish a new public-private partnership to help Minnesota respond to the digital equity needs spotlighted by the COVID pandemic. Blandin's role was to help center rural community needs in the partnership's response. Other founding partners included: Best Buy, Comcast, The Minnesota Business Partnership, and the St. Paul and Minnesota Community Foundation. The Governor's office joined the partnership in a liaison role.

The Partnership set the following goals:

1. Provide at least 25,000 high-need students with computing devices and high speed internet access for distance learning and enrichment activities, ensuring more equitable access to educational resources.
2. Create permanent solutions to the lack of reliable, affordable broadband access in Minnesota's urban and rural communities.
2. Connect students to essential resources and social services and ensure that educators are equipped to effectively support learning – now and in the future.

Early on, the Partnership recognized the need for project staff support beyond what the partners could provide on their own. Collectivity Partners was hired to provide this support. Collectivity is a technology services and consulting cooperative focused on enabling organizations to effectively collaborate, amplify, and accelerate mission deliver.

Specifically, Collectivity was hired to advise on strategy and program objectives and offer project management operations support to this work. In late summer 2020, Blandin Foundation provided a \$10,000 grant to the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation to obtain consulting support for the Partnership.

**Round I Grants:**

A total of \$2.15 million raised by the Partners and awarded in grants to twenty-three organizations. Seventy percent of the awarded funds, \$1.5 million, went to rural-based, rural-serving organization.

*Round I rural grantees included:* Austin Aspires, B&G Club of Leech Lake Area; B&G Clubs of Greater MN (MN Alliance); Project FINE, LISC Duluth, Minisinaakwang Learning Academy, and Technology Access Cluster (TAC) entities supporting rural school districts, including IASC, ECCMECC, Little Crow Tele-Media Network, South Central Service Cooperative, Southwest West Central Service Cooperative, NW Links.

**Round II Grants:**

A total of \$2.35 million raised by the [Minnesota Business Coalition for Racial Equity](#) (MBCRE) was given to the Partnership for distribution in grants to twenty-nine organizations. Twenty percent of the awarded funds, raised by these metro businesses, \$470,000, went to rural serving organizations and tribal governments.

*Round II rural grantees included:* Bois Forte Band; Bug O Nay Ge Shig school; Fond du Lac Band; Lower Sioux Indian Community; United Way of Cass-Clay (Fargo Moorhead); Centro Tyrone Guzman (St. Cloud; Foley); CLUES (Austin, Willmar). Grants to Red Lake and White Earth tribal governments totaling \$300,000 also were made outside of this grant round.

In sum, during this reporting period, with input and encouragement from Blandin Foundation, the Partnership invested a total of \$2.74 million in rural organizations and tribal governments to help redress digital inequities in their community. The return on Blandin's \$60,000 investment in the Partnership was 45 dollars of other funding into rural for every Blandin dollar invested.

## Building Community Capacity for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century - Promoting the Intelligent Community Framework

Blandin Foundation has been using the ICF framework in its community work since 2008. Since then, the Arrowhead region has had particularly heavy exposure, with ten cohorts of Iron Range BBCs in the past five years, and the 2021 AIR initiative. It's no wonder that when a group of leaders in the northeast Minnesota teamed up to submit a proposal for the EDA's Build Back Better Regional Challenge, they chose the Intelligent Community Framework as their organizing construct.



The northeast Minnesota coalition, led by IRRR developed a vision for its work:

Northeast Minnesota seeks to develop a prosperous 21st century rural economy through the creation of a digital ecosystem that re-envision regional industries and ignites innovative, equitable entrepreneurship.

Per their application narrative, “The ICF conceptual framework, which includes six elements of community performance that its research has identified as central to 21<sup>st</sup> century economic prosperity, guides the coalition and frames this application’s project selection.”

The proposal itself includes seven component projects proposals:

1. Infrastructure for Digital Economy Access - NESC
2. Building Rehabilitation and Shovel Ready Site Work – IRRR
3. Comprehensive Knowledge Workforce Strategy – Northspan
4. Innovate 218 Innovation Facilities and Training – IEDC/Innovate 218
5. Digital Economy Asset and Cluster Analysis – IRRR
6. Non-Battery Renewable Energy Storage – NRRI
7. Biomass Energy and Advanced Carbon Products – NRRI

The [Build Back Better Regional Challenge](#) is designed to assist communities nationwide in their efforts to build back better by accelerating the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and building local economies that will be resilient to future economic shocks.

The \$1 billion Build Back Better Regional Challenge will provide a transformational investment to 20-30 regions across the country that want to revitalize their economies. These regions will have the opportunity to grow new regional industry clusters or scale existing ones through planning, infrastructure, innovation and entrepreneurship, workforce development, access to capital, and more.

## National Impact

During this reporting period, Blandin's rural broadband experience and expertise were sought out by numerous regional and national groups. A partial list includes:

- Benton Foundation
- Innovia Foundation
- Pew Trust
- Philanthropy NorthWest
- Wisconsin Philanthropy Network
- Philanthropy Colorado
- Southeastern Council on Foundations
- NTIA

Blandin's broadband work has been called out as best practice in numerous books and publications. Examples include this recently released White Paper: [Bridge to Everywhere: Practical Considerations for Philanthropy for Expanding Broadband Access in Rural Communities](#) - a guide for philanthropic organizations interested in narrowing the digital divide, or the gap between those with internet access and those without, in rural communities.



The authors cite Blandin Foundation as embodying the essence of their handbook's message, "It's not about broadband. It's about what broadband can do. Broadband is the means to the end... internet access is fundamental to everything philanthropy cares about."

**Christopher Mitchell** is the Director of the Community Broadband Networks Initiative (Muninetworks) at the Institute for Local and Self Reliance. While based in Minnesota, Muninetworks is a player nationally for promoting better deployment and use of networks through local engagement. He shared the following feedback about the national impact of Blandin's broadband work:

"Today I was on a call with people ... down in Louisiana and they mentioned Bernadine and the work of Blandin as an inspiration. They said multiple times that they wished they could just grab all the work from Minnesota (meaning Blandin) and put it in Louisiana so I suggested that I would take the model and drop it in the Mississippi River - they will get it in two weeks!

There are many local groups that are quietly using all the information Blandin... and others are producing to get people moving in the right direction. When I hear [the folks at] Pew [Trust] saying the things matter-of-factly that we have been saying for years, [I see how] our work has become common sense in many corners... we have more work to do, but we have definitely moved the needle quite a bit! Pew staff also reference your models and the importance of a long-term commitment."

The Pew Trust interviewed **Bernadine Joselyn** in March of 2021 for an [article](#) titled, *What Policymakers Can Learn From the 'Minnesota Model' of Broadband Expansion*, where she discussed how the speed goals, Broadband Task Force, Rural Broadband Coalition, and state broadband grant program all play an important role in advancing broadband access and deployment. A collaborative approach is key. She ends the interview with, "No one entity has the resources to solve the problem on its own."

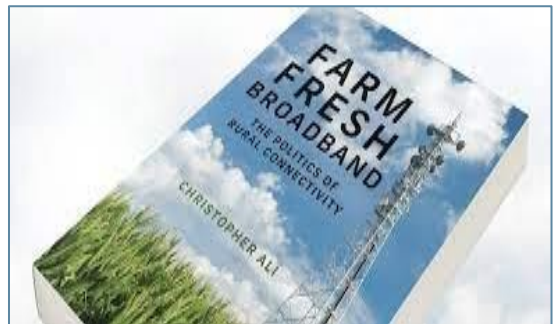
**Senator Klobuchar** shared this reflection about the impact of Blandin’s broadband work with attendees at the 2021 Blandin Broadband Conference:

“I mostly want to thank all of you for your advocacy. Literally, taking on this bill...and having this success in getting it in was because of all of you guys... ..I’m at a commerce hearing, where we do a lot of the broadband work...and they kept complimenting Minnesota as one of the better states! I know we still have problems, but I thought that was kind of cool, because we’ve done a better job of mapping, because you guys have been so innovative in getting in rural, you should know that...even though things are bad they’re better than a lot of other places. It also makes me feel good that when we get this huge infusion of cash...through the state, we’re going to do a better job getting it out and managing it and making sure it’s fair. You also have Blandin there making sure rural Minnesotan’s get their fair share.”

Blandin’s work was called out in a new book, *Farm Fresh Broadband, the Politics of Rural Connectivity*, which offers an analysis of the failure of U.S. broadband policy to solve the rural–urban digital divide, with a proposal for a new national rural broadband plan. Author **Christopher Ali** wrote to Blandin staff, “Blandin’s work is so crucially important to connectivity and inclusivity and has been such an inspiration for me.”

In the final paragraph of *Farm Fresh Broadband*, Ali, Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia, writes:

“I am continually struck by something Bernadine Joselyn, director of public policy and engagement at Minnesota’s Blandin Foundation, told me in her interview for this book: “Everything is better with better broadband.” I repeat it here and throughout this book to shed a clear, bright light on a complex issue...I invoke this phrase to demonstrate how... rural broadband [is] lived and experienced (or not) on the ground in rural communities throughout the country.”



## Seeding Best Practices Beyond Minnesota

Community Broadband Resources: *Accelerate!* is a unique approach to community broadband planning using online content, expert speakers, and ongoing foundation support to simultaneously facilitate multiple community teams' broadband planning efforts. The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, a nationally recognized broadband policy leader, has requested and received permission to use this framework with up to twelve Illinois communities in an effort supported by Heartland Forward, another rural-focused philanthropy. Heartland Forward is now in discussions with the Benton Institute to deliver this training in three additional states.

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"I have to say...how much I admire ... the [broadband] work that Blandin has done in Minnesota. [Blandin] has stood up programs that are examples for the rest of the nation.

- **Adrienne Furniss**  
Executive Director  
Benton Institute for  
Broadband & Society

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## Mountain Summit: Accountability for Learning, Development & Adaptation



The emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which shone a bright light on the need for broadband, along with the federal government’s response, have caused seismic shifts in the landscape and have major implications for Blandin’s broadband work. These truly historic investments will transform the horizon of opportunity for the communities we serve and challenge Blandin to adapt its broadband work to meet the moment:

- 1) If used wisely, these federal investments in broadband access and adoption could go a long way toward meeting Minnesota’s broadband goals.
- 2) Planning will shift to specific geographically focused broadband infrastructure projects that will be led by providers, consulting engineers and community finance professionals, with less room for community organization and planning.

- 3) The checkerboard of “allowable” geographies for project development reduces the possibility for future countywide community-focused broadband projects like those Blandin’s programming has made possible to date.

Recruitment challenges for the most recent broadband cohorts suggest that the programs Blandin offered during this reporting period (delivered to date in sixty-one counties) may have reached a saturation point, underscoring the need to adapt our work in response to changing circumstances.

While historic public investments, well-deployed, could spur significant progress on broadband infrastructure goals, digital equity and digital literacy will remain significant challenges for rural communities. Despite the much-lauded “Minnesota Model” of broadband “civic infrastructure” (state broadband goals, state broadband grant program, state broadband mapping, Governor’s broadband Task Force), Minnesota still lacks a coordinated plan for redressing digital literacy, a deficiency that shows up in the 3.2 out of 6 rating it received from the respected National Digital Inclusion Alliance in its [State Digital Equity Score Card report](#). With federal funding on the way, organizations that deliver digital literacy programs may be positioned to compete for these one-time investments.

In reimaging our broadband work, staff will continue to build on these principles:

- **Full engagement.** Using Philanthropy’s full toolbox, in partnership with others, helps super-charge community-based work while also impacting systems that impact rural.
- **Be flexible and adaptive.**
- **Leveraging Our Reputation and Relationships.** We continue to recognize reputation and relationships as two of our program’s most valuable assets. Reputation for attracting additional resources (human, financial) and relationships as the force field that keeps people engaged.
- **Drive Collaborative Approaches.** Partnerships are key; Blandin cannot do this work alone.
- **Continue to influence and Inform Statewide Policy and Messaging.** While Minnesota once led in state broadband policy, other states have now overtaken us in terms of state investment and policy goals. Given our relationships with the national network of state broadband leaders, NTIA, USDA and others, Blandin Foundation is uniquely positioned to help ensure that Minnesota’s broadband policy debate is informed by rural advocacy efforts nationally and reflects ambitious goals rural communities have set for themselves.

## Appendix: Grants Awarded through Blandin Community Broadband Program from January 2020 through November 2021

Grant Type	Project Owner	Project Name	Description	Amount
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency	Clean Transportation Pilot	To decrease Arrowhead Transit's carbon footprint by reducing its greenhouse gas emissions, and to create more affordable transportation opportunities across Northeastern Minnesota, ensuring individuals and families have equitable access to transportation options they can afford through the purchase two electric buses. The buses will be operated on their busiest routes, Virginia and Grand Rapids. Arrowhead Transit will use data gathered through this pilot to make clean transportation investments across their 10-county service region. They will also provide guidance and support for other transportation providers and fleet operators in implementing their own projects.	\$50,000
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	City of Grand Rapids	Smart Rural Mobility Outreach & Seminars: Minnesota's Automated Rural Transit Initiative (goMARTI)	To conduct outreach and storytelling among key users of the electric, autonomous shuttles that will be deployed in Grand Rapids in late 2021 and showcase those and other learnings to peer organizations around the state and region through a series of seminars. As one of the first winter rural pilots in the country, it will be important to understand and share best practices of community engagement with the rest of the region, country, and industry to help empower other community leaders to understand the positive impacts an initiative like this can deliver. This project will also promote Grand Rapids and the surrounding area as a good place to live, work, and visit.	\$50,000
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	Duluth Lighthouse for the Blind	Tech to Connect for Older Adults in Rural Arrowhead	To help alleviate loneliness and social isolation among Arrowhead seniors by promoting broadband connectivity and use. Project activities will include public education and outreach, needs assessments, skills training, loans of technology devices, and internet connections, and support of one or more remote 'engagement groups' for older adults in collaboration with multiple local organizations regionwide.	\$50,000

Grant Type	Project Owner	Project Name	Description	Amount
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	Hibbing Dylan Project (w/ Iron Range Tourism Bureau)	City of Dylan Music and Art	To create a more welcoming community by upgrading an outdated sound system that will rely on wireless technology and strong internet. It both revitalizes and updates a downtown tradition of music in the street and embraces local musicians in a creative and celebratory way. Because the music and artistic elements of this project are being created in public spaces, City of Dylan Music and Art programming will be accessible to all.	\$10,400
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	Housing and Redevelopment Authority of Hibbing	Create Learning Spaces & 7th Avenue Broadband Expansion	To narrow the digital divide by designing and providing residents of Hibbing HRA's 7th Avenue housing development with a library and comfortable learning facility that's well equipped with technology/devices (computers, projector, screen, and more) for resident technology programming and digital navigation services. Libraries Without Borders US will oversee the creation of curriculum, and will coordinate trainings and programs with the Arrowhead Public Library System and the Project Free Care Clinic. Health literacy and digital literacy programs will be delivered onsite and at nearby library branches.	\$59,780
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	ISD 2142 St. Louis County (w/ Range Assn of Municipalities and Schools)	St Louis County School District Wireless Broadband Project	To map internet speeds at the homes of all of the students in the St. Louis County school district to inform the design of a wireless broadband network that achieves the highest level of internet service for the most students at the lowest cost.	\$8,000
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	Itasca Economic Development Corporation	LaunchMN – Innovate 218	To extend the impact of Itasca County's participation in LaunchMN, a statewide collaborative effort to accelerate the growth of startups and amplify Minnesota as a national leader in innovation.  Innovate 218 will bring together a network of partners to create a brand and marketing outreach strategy to reach entrepreneurs, identify gaps, and build resources to support them; and offer nine-week training programs based on the Lean Startup Model to up to thirty entrepreneurs.	\$50,000

Grant Type	Project Owner	Project Name	Description	Amount
<b>Arrowhead Intelligent Region</b>	Itasca Economic Development Corporation	Innovation Center	<p>To provide education, training and workforce development opportunities to area students and community members. The Innovation Center will be a place where innovators and entrepreneurs can thrive and grow. It will help create a pipeline of local workforce for local industries, and a path of opportunity for area youth.</p> <p>In Phase I half of IEDC's existing Airport Road Building will be renovated to serve as a training, workforce development, and innovation facility. Phase II includes the evaluation of the larger Innovation Center (location, needs, partners), identification of site, and funding options. Other partners include NE MN Higher Education District, NE MN Office of Job Training, and Itasca Area Schools Collaborative &amp; Next Career Pathways.</p>	\$50,000
<b>Arrowhead Intelligent Region</b>	Minnesota Children's Press	Arrowhead Children's Publishing Cooperative: An 18-month Collaboration in Applied Innovation	<p>To deliver an outdoors, GIS-based approach to teaching spatial thinking, environmental stewardship, writing, illustrating, and publishing for children in Cook County that may be expanded across the Arrowhead region.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Litter Lab field season - students will collect litter in Grand Marais and the Lake Superior shoreline and use ArcGIS Mapping software to map its location.</li> <li>2. Students will analyze the Litter Lab data, propose solutions, and write an illustrate the book, and present the results to the Grand Marais City Council.</li> <li>3. Field test and focus group the book, model, methods, curriculum, and teaching templates with Arrowhead region peers, and coordinate a 7-county outreach campaign.</li> <li>4. Conduct 2 civic journalism workshops in Arrowhead region where youth and mentors teach adults practical digital media competencies.</li> <li>5. Integrate findings from Arrowhead region feedback from civic journalism workshops and create free online curriculum. Sell Litter Lab field guide to fund civic projects.</li> <li>6. Finalize report to local govt and business leaders, finalize website and curriculum, social media campaign, continue to present findings to community groups.</li> </ol>	\$35,000



Grant Type	Project Owner	Project Name	Description	Amount
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	Minnesota Children's Press (w/ 100 Rural Women)	Cooperative Business Model: Arrowhead Children's Publishing	To conduct research to identify and define cooperative and collaborative publishing business and financial models to support creative and cutting-edge publishing product utilizing local talents to support the growth of impactful and engaging children's publishing in the Arrowhead Region. The project is specifically designed to complement and support the work of MCP.	\$15,000
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	Northland Foundation (w/ The Northspan Group)	Welcoming Community	To transform leadership practices in the Arrowhead to embrace the diversity that exists and will continue to grow in its communities, including through increasing digital access equity and inclusion across the region. Fostering welcoming and increasing digital access are interrelated steps in the development of more generous, inclusive, and engaged communities that can work toward eliminating the opportunity gaps that exist in Northeastern Minnesota.	\$50,000
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	Northland Foundation	Technology Assessment Project	To help small businesses learn about and adopt the technology they need to effectively manage and market a business in the "new normal" of the post-pandemic world. Northland Small Business Development Center will provide one-on-one technology consulting to 60-80 small business in the seven county Arrowhead Region. Participating businesses qualify for matching funds to implement technology upgrades.	\$50,000
Arrowhead Intelligent Region	Regents of The University of Minnesota (w/ Smart North)	Smart Street Lights & Mobility Hubs, Grand Rapids	To plan for and implement a pilot project supporting the deployment and adoption of smart streetlights and mobility hubs in the City of Grand Rapids. Smart Mobility Hubs are interactive kiosks that bring a city's transportation options together at a single location so users can get where they need to go efficiently and affordably. Amenities available at Smart Mobility Hubs include municipal Wi-Fi, bike/scooter-share, bike racks, ride-share pick-up/drop off zones, car sharing parking, and EV charging. The infrastructure will allow different city departments to access and share data, enabling robust 5G connectivity throughout the city. Grand Rapids was chosen as the pilot community because of the autonomous vehicle mobility initiative to be launched here in September 2021.	\$50,000

Grant Type	Project Owner	Project Name	Description	Amount
<b>Arrowhead Intelligent Region</b>	ReVive Virginia (w/ Iron Range Tourism Bureau)	Casual Co-working and Welcoming Communities	To promote the City of Virginia and the surrounding area as attractive and welcoming to new residents by creating a casual co-working space at an existing business with internet upgrades for remote workers and twice-monthly "Jelly events" where people who work from home can gather for networking and comradery. <a href="http://www.workatjelly.com/">http://www.workatjelly.com/</a> Highlighting Family Friendly workplaces will give employers another recruiting tool, and job seekers a way of identifying employers who may provide flexible schedules, onsite services, or other ways of serving families. A service design project will identify ways newcomers can be better served and welcomed, and a Homeward Bound component will build a sense of community among residents and newcomers alike.	\$16,950
<b>BBC: Chisago Lakes Area  Grantee: Chisago County HRA-EDA</b>	Chisago Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce	Broadband Infrastructure Community Survey	Gather the data necessary to talk with providers, community leaders, and legislators about broadband infrastructure needs across the region by conducting a survey of residents and businesses on current internet satisfaction levels and unmet needs, and promote the Minnesota Speed Test.	\$75,000
	Chisago Lakes Area Community Ed. & Chisago Age Well	Access to Technology for All Ages	Reduce the digital divide by providing older adults with educational resources, classes, and support to use equipment, websites, and virtual platforms to stay involved and access activities and services in the community.	
	Chisago Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce	New Chamber of Commerce Website	Showcase local businesses with a new website for the Chisago Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce. The new site will be much easier to use and include a data management system to provide higher value to the membership and community at large.	
	Chisago County HRA-EDA	Virtual Manufacturing Tours	Expand students' exposure to technology and manufacturing as a career choice by producing eight video-tours of local manufacturing businesses. Students will view the tours in school and be able to follow up with the business via videoconference.	
	Chisago Lakes School District	Mobile Hotspots for Community	Increase access to the internet by deploying cellular mobile hotspots for community members in need, focusing first on families with students in the school system.	

Grant Type	Project Owner	Project Name	Description	Amount
<b>BBC Donation</b>	Le Sueur County	Le Sueur County BB Donation	Donation in support of BBC-related meeting and marketing costs.	\$1,000
<b>BBC: Le Sueur County Grantee: Le Sueur County</b>	Le Sueur County Broadband Initiative	Technology Enhancements	Improve the effectiveness of the Le Sueur County Broadband Initiative (LCBI) through the use of Google Suites for Business, including training for all team members.	\$75,000
	Le Sueur County Broadband Initiative	Community Technology Assistance	Improve access to technology throughout the community by increasing the number of public access sites and training opportunities with an emphasis on Zoom and other applications for community connectivity.	
	Le Sueur County Broadband Initiative	LCBI Communications	Amplify the work of the LCBI through enhanced communication and marketing, including improving access to county-wide calendars and offering integrated community education classes.	
	Le Sueur County Broadband Initiative & Region Nine	Le Sueur County Economic Development Forum	Address the lack of economic development at the county-level by conducting a needs-assessment and holding a summer event for businesses across the county.	
	Tri City School District	Broadband Coalition Fellowship	Enhance and support broadband planning efforts and to support the creation of digital navigation projects that will support residents, businesses, and libraries through the hire of a two-year Lead for Minnesota Fellow.	
<b>BBC: Otter Tail County Grantee: Otter Tail County</b>	Viking Library	Free Public Wi-Fi	Increase access to the internet by establishing at least four additional free Wi-Fi public access sites throughout the county.	\$75,000
	Otter Tail County	Smart Rooms	Increase access to and use of technology by equipping at least six indoor public meeting spaces with audiovisual equipment so individuals and groups can attend virtual meetings, distance learning, and job interviews.	
	Viking Library	Tech Packs	Improve access to technology for people experiencing economic impacts due to COVID-19 by providing free laptops and mobile hot-spots with 6 months prepaid service along with digital resources for jobseekers to 100 county residents, with emphasis on those seeking employment.	
	Greater Fergus Falls	Youth Exposure to Tech & Careers	Expand students' exposure to technology-related careers by holding a virtual career fair and increasing STEAM offerings, including coding and robotics, in kids' summer programming.	

Grant Type	Project Owner	Project Name	Description	Amount
<b>BBC/Grantee: Otter Tail County</b>	Fergus Falls Chamber of Commerce	Improving Business Resilience Through Technology	Increase the sophistication of use of technology by local businesses by conducting technology audits where the business's needs related to digital security, email, POS systems, and e-commerce needs are assessed, and training offered.	\$75,000
<b>BBC: White Earth Nation  Grantee: White Earth Tribal Council</b>	Reservation Business Committee	Community Wi-Fi Hotspots	Increase access to the internet by providing a safe and secure location for residents in each community within reservation boundaries to access the internet.	\$75,000
	Reservation Business Committee	Elder Devices and Hotspots	Increase internet access and use among Elders in need by providing a device, mobile hotspot access, and digital navigation services to Elders for telemedicine, online classes or meetings, etc. Lending may be short- or long-term depending on the situation and need.	
	Reservation Business Committee	Cell Signal Boosters and Hotspots for Buses	Increase access to the internet by installing Wi-Fi and cell signal boosters on White Earth Public Transit Buses.	
	Reservation Business Committee	Hotspot Lending Program for Students/Families	Increase internet access and use, including access to schoolwork, among students and their families through the establishment of a hotspot lending program, with special emphasis on those living in tribally owned or operated housing units.	
	Reservation Business Committee	Cell Signal Boosters for Communities	Increase cellular internet access by installing cell signal boosters in each community within the reservation boundaries with poor cell service.	
	Reservation Business Committee	Televisions for Buses	Improve communications and marketing of community events and announcements, daily information, and area programming by installing televisions in White Earth Public Transit Buses.	
<b>Blandin Broadband Communities</b>	Koochiching EDA	Koochiching Tech Initiative BBC Projects II	<i>See previous report</i>	\$11,500
<b>Broadband Innovation</b>	PCs for People	Distribute Computers to Rural MN Communities (2021 BBCs)	Coordinate the distribution of 300 computers to eligible recipients in each of six new Blandin Broadband Communities. Communities may decide to distribute the computers to eligible individual recipients and/or create a public computer lab.	\$33,000
<b>Broadband Innovation</b>	Redwood County	Mobilize Broadband Access in Redwood County	Accelerate the development of a broadband implementation plan for the County which engages community residents, providers, civic leaders and leverage state/federal resources through the hire of a two-year Lead for Minnesota Fellow.	\$5,000

Grant Type	Project Owner	Project Name	Description	Amount
<b>Broadband Innovation</b>	Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation	Partnership for a ConnectedMN Consulting Support	Amplify the work of the Partnership in narrowing the digital divide among students in MN through the hire of consultant support.	\$10,000
<b>Broadband Innovation</b>	Southwest Regional Development Commission	Minnesota Speed Test Initiative	Conduct a state-wide crowd-sourced broadband speed test to provide the most accurate, granular data about broadband service in the state. The data will be used by local and state officials to make important decisions about where new broadband infrastructure should be built and how much to fund state programs that support the work.	\$20,000
<b>Robust Network Feasibility Fund</b>	City of Rice Lake	Survey and Community Meeting	Increase citizen support for high-speed internet by mailing information on broadband to every home promoting a survey, and to attend a community meeting to discuss the importance of broadband and respond to questions and concerns.	\$1,250
<b>Robust Network Feasibility Fund</b>	Kanabec County	Kanabec County 2021 Broadband Feasibility Study	Conduct a feasibility study to better understand options for improving broadband infrastructure and services within Kanabec County, and to identify potential partners to provide these services. They plan to use what they learn to help the county board decide if and how to allocate its ARP funds towards broadband.	\$25,000
<b>Robust Network Feasibility Fund</b>	Nicollet County	Nicollet County Broadband Study	Conduct a feasibility study to better understand options for improving broadband infrastructure and services throughout rural Nicollet County. They will also use this process to identify potential partners to provide these services.	\$25,000
<b>Robust Network Feasibility Fund</b>	Pine County	Pine County Broadband Consulting Project	Conduct a feasibility study to better understand options for improving broadband infrastructure and services throughout Pine County. They will also use this process to identify potential partners to provide these services.	\$25,000
<b>Robust Network Feasibility Fund</b>	Waseca County	Waseca County Broadband Feasibility Study	Conduct a feasibility study to better understand options for improving broadband infrastructure and services within Waseca County. They will also use this process to identify potential partners to provide these services.	\$25,000

**Total grants awarded Jan 2020 – Dec 2021: \$993,880**

[www.broadband.blandinfoundation.org](http://www.broadband.blandinfoundation.org) | 877-882-2257 | [broadband@blandinfoundation.org](mailto:broadband@blandinfoundation.org)



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