

AT A REGULAR MEETING OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY  
COMMISSIONERS HELD IN AND FOR GADSDEN  
COUNTY, FLORIDA ON MARCH 1, 2022 AT 4:30 P.M.,  
THE FOLLOWING PROCEEDING WAS HAD, VIZ:

Present: Dr. Anthony "Dr. V" Viegbesie, Chair, District 2  
Ronterious "Ron" Green, Vice Chair, District 5  
Eric Hinson, District 1  
Kimblin NeSmith, District 3  
Brenda Holt, Chair, District 4  
Edward J. Dixon, County Administrator  
Clayton Knowles, County Attorney  
Marcella Blocker, Deputy Clerk  
Sara Green, Deputy Clerk

**CALL TO ORDER, INVOCATION, PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Chair Viegbesie brought the workshop to order at 4:37PM and called for the invocation to be led by Vice Chair Green before the pledge.

**CITIZENS REQUESTING TO BE HEARD (3-Minute Limit)**

*Anyone wishing to speak on agenda items or non-agenda items should schedule or notify the County Administrator's Office before attending the meeting and will be asked to follow the Gadsden County Public Meetings Citizens Access Guidelines. Also, public comment for Commission meetings can be submitted via email to [CitizensToBeHeard@gadsdencountyfl.gov](mailto:CitizensToBeHeard@gadsdencountyfl.gov) until noon on January 18, 2022. Comments submitted after the deadline but prior to the meeting will be added to the official record, but the County cannot guarantee that Commissioners and staff will have adequate time to review comments prior to the meeting.*

**GENERAL BUSINESS**

Commissioner NeSmith read the above statement.

**1. Discussion Regarding the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) Broadband Planning Toolkit Project and The Integrity Group, Inc. (TIG) Proposal**

County Administrator Mr. Ed Dixon introduced the item and Mrs. Sheree Keeler of the Integrity Group. He stated the purpose of the presentation is to provide background on the DEO Office of Broadband, the DEO Toolkit Planning process, and TIG's proposal to facilitate Gadsden County in implementing the Toolkit and completion of DEO reports.

Mrs. Keeler came before the Board to begin her presentation.

The mission of the DEO Office of Broadband is to work with local and state government agencies, community organizations, and private businesses to increase the availability and effectiveness of broadband internet throughout the state, specifically in small and rural communities. Through these partnerships the Department encourages investment and grant funding opportunities for the broadband program that focus on the expansion of broadband.

Mrs. Keeler explained the **State Strategic Plan**: created strategic plan to increase and improve the ability of, access to, and use of broadband Internet Service in Florida by June 30, 2022, and biennially thereafter. Must include a process to:

- Review and verify public input on the broadband Internet transmission speeds and availability
- Review Federal broadband activities, and
- Funding sources.

**Local Technology Teams**: build and facilitate the local technology planning teams to work closely with rural communities to:

- Understand current broadband availability
- Identify assets for broadband deployment
- Build partnerships with service providers
- Identify underserved and unserved residents and businesses
- Identify funding opportunities, and
- Provide assistance when applying for Federal grants for broadband Internet Service

**Broadband Map**: develop a map of broadband Internet Service availability throughout the state consistent with the FCC Digital Opportunity Data Collection Program, which must

- Identify where broadband cable networks exist, services available to end users, gaps in rural areas, and
- Download and upload transmission speeds.

Mrs. Keeler also stated that DEO must receive and verify public input to identify and locations in which broadband Internet Service is not available, including locations with transmission speeds below the Federal Communications Commission standard of 25 MBPS downstream and three MBPS upstream. The map must be completed by June 30, 2022.

She then explained terms that would be used in the presentation.

**Technical Assistance**: provide technical and planning assistance to rural communities.

**Broadband Opportunity Program**: establish the broadband opportunity program to award grants to applicants who seek to expand broadband two bonds served areas, rulemaking for the program (subject to appropriations), and apply for Federal funds.

**Public Use**: encourage public use of internet service through broadband grant programs.

**FCC**: monitor, participate in, and provide input on Federal Communications Commission's proceedings that are related to the geographic availability and deployment of broadband Internet in Florida.

Ms. Keeler stated there are two purposes of the Broadband Planning Toolkit. The first is it helps DEO meet its statutory directives and provides guidance to local governments to ensure consistent data collection methods, verification of data, public participation, and the reporting of finding some local governments. The second, it provides local governments a framework and

templates for a national broadband planning that can be used for seeking grant funds and be incorporated into the State Strategic Plan.

Mrs. Keeler explained there are nine steps to the process: engage stakeholders, assemble a team, identify community priorities, harness the data, considered digital inclusion, assess resources and infrastructure, engage local Internet providers, evaluate solutions, and develop and execute solutions.

Under the first step, stakeholders would be categorized as elected officials, communities, citizens, businesses, nonprofits, nongovernmental, and local technology planning team. Along with this, there is an ongoing process to inform, engage, seek input, share information, and collaborate on ideas.

For assembling a team, the team should include those from industries within the community. Some of these categories include libraries, tourism, agriculture, and healthcare. Team members represent his or her organization for industry sector. They are:

- Involved in every step of the broadband toolkit planning process.
- Can do it to his or her respective state corporate groups.
- Provide information to generate a countywide and inventory of existing broadband projects, grant funding, infrastructure, geographic data, zoning data, and other elements as identified.
- Provide input and collaborate to build consensus for countywide priorities, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, challenges, goals, and solutions for the completion of the Gadsden County Toolkit Report.

Next step is to identify community priorities, the local technology planning team should review the overall goals of the state's broadband efforts, the current status of broadband availability within the county or region, and their role in meeting broadband goals.

Harnessing the data is about the public's opinion for business and community surveys and a public meeting on the topics of:

- Community needs,
- Broadband consumption/utilization, and
- Expansion efforts.

Public input will give a snapshot in time of current broadband services in the price that citizens are willing to pay for such services. DEO has provided sample surveys to ensure data is collected consistently and uniformly across all local governments.

Ms. Keeler explained the next step is Consider Digital Inclusion. She explained this that ensures that communities and businesses have access to robust and affordable broadband, broadband connections, Internet enabled devices that meet their needs, and skill sets to access and use broadband services and capabilities. The planning team will identify digital literacy goals for the County's Final Broadband Report based on harness the data reporting and perspective from the industry whom they represent. This is followed by step six, assess resources and infrastructure. Each team member and engaged provider will be asked to complete the Broadband Planning Inventory template provided by DEO.

Mrs. Keeler explained step seven would be to engage with local providers. She suggested engaging with them early on in the process. She also encouraged the Board to present ideas to the team, participate in SWOC and Facilities Inventory Assessment from the provider perspective, and assistance that eight which is to identify and evaluate potential short term and long-term solutions to gaps identified in the “Harness the Data” step.

Step eight would be to evaluate solutions. The team and engaged providers would list and evaluate potential doable solutions and doable strategies to consider for the expansion of broadband.

Ms. Keeler explained the final step of the process which would be develop and execute solutions. Within this step, she explained they would be required to review all findings in draft Broadband Toolkit Findings Report, encourage public input, host a board workshop, refine the draft, and finally the board approval of the Final Broadband Toolkit Findings Report.

Ms. Keeler introduced The Integrity Group’s proposal to facilitate Gadsden County in the implementing of the Toolkit and completion of the DEO reports. This would involve implementing that DEO Broadband Toolkit Planning process, document the process and provide Project Management Services, encourage public participation to input, encourage citizens to test broadband speed to populate DEL Broadband map, and solicit and gather data and information from the public and the Team. The Integrity Group would also compile and analyze data and information gathered, build consensus among the Team, and compile preparing finalize DEO required reports.

Commissioner NeSmith mentioned a local city having its own broadband company that was able to distribute Internet to its citizens. He continued and said he believes the county should control as many resources as possible, Internet being one of them, to provide the best services to those citizens.

Chair Viegbesie said the timing of this workshop is appropriate because of broadband being the topic of discussion at a convention he recently went to in Washington. He also mentioned that there are multiple funding opportunities for broadband and counties. He referenced the telecommunications program with USDA and said each county should be in contact with the broadband department with the state.

Chair Viegbesie suggested The Integrity Group stay connected with the County Administrator to continue working with the state office above to ensure the county receives funding.

Commissioner Hinson said the county needs to make sure they are compliant with the bidding process. He said he has nothing against the material in front of him but wants to ensure the county can get a better product for less.

Commissioner Holt pointed out that the proposal is for up to \$200,000. She said she needs to know the hourly rate for The Integrity Group and that she would like those that are out doing the surveys to get paid. She also asked if towers are included in the equipment.

Ms. Keeler said the proposal is to get into inventory for the resources the county has and to find solutions for what resources are needed.

Commissioner Holt reiterated that she wishes those doing the surveys are compensated and also community friendly.

Commissioner Green said he agrees that those doing the surveying should be compensated with a stipend of some sort. He wanted to make sure that is included in the budget.

**MOTION TO ADJOURN**

**THERE BEING NO FURTHER BUSINESS TO COME BEFORE THE BOARD, CHAIR VIEGBESIE DECLARED THE MEETING ADJOURNED AT 6:01 P.M.**

**GADSDEN COUNTY, FLORIDA**

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**ANTHONY VIEGBESIE, Chair  
Board of County Commissioners**

**ATTEST:**

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**NICHOLAS THOMAS, Clerk**