

### Q&A with Gayle Manchin of the Appalachian Regional Commission

# A Quest to Connect Appalachia and Close the Digital Divide

An abundance of federal money and emerging partnerships across Appalachian states may help finally connect the most rural areas of the 13-state region.

By Hilda Legg / Legg Strategies

**A**s the federal co-chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), Gayle Manchin was appointed by President Biden and confirmed by the U.S. Senate to help lead an economic development partnership entity of the federal government and 13 state governments focusing on 423 counties across the Appalachian region. The commission's leadership also includes the governors from each of the 13 Appalachian states, and its mission is to innovate, partner and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia to help the region achieve socioeconomic parity with the nation.

The ARC uses congressionally appropriated funds to invest in the region's economic and community development through grants, including \$6.3 million awarded in January to bolster broadband access across 50 under-connected communities in every Appalachian subregion, better positioning them to grow better broadband economic opportunities.

Hilda Legg, a rural economic development consultant for Legg Strategies, recently talked with Manchin about the role broadband plays in the economic development of rural America. Following are highlights of the conversation.

**HILDA LEGG:** *Can you explain the history of ARC?*

**GAYLE MANCHIN:** ARC was established when John F. Kennedy campaigned in West Virginia. What he saw was really appalling – it was so rural and isolated, and there were no highways. He said that no community can be an island, and no state can grow without a road system. When he went back to Washington and was elected president, he started to create ARC. Of course, he never saw it become law – that happened under LBJ and the war on poverty after Kennedy's assassination. But the point is that building a highway through the Appalachian Mountains was not easy, which was why it had never been done. That was the original purpose of ARC: to make sure that a highway system was constructed through the mountains.



**HL:** *Isn't it interesting when we think about the parallels with that time and today? During Kennedy's campaign, there were still pockets in the Appalachian region where people spoke Elizabethan English because their isolation was so extreme. The television cameras that accompanied Kennedy and then the Appalachian Development Highway System opened the region. We talk about broadband and the internet as once again bringing opportunities to people in rural communities. What is the status of the Appalachian Development Highway System today?*

**GM:** It started, and it continues. It is about 91 percent complete from southern New York to northern Mississippi. Now the states work in conjunction; both state monies



and federal ARC dollars are used. Building through the mountains is tough, but what started as two lanes and sometimes a three-lane road, now is growing into four-, five- and six-lane highways as the area develops. It certainly makes a difference for the people who live in the Appalachian region and for businesses trying to move there. So it's very important, but the irony is that today, we are working on a whole new highway system.

**HL:** *You have been very involved in the leadership of West Virginia, and your husband, Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV), is a very prominent U.S. senator. To what degree were you aware of ARC in your prior leadership roles and positions?*

**GM:** I was aware of the commission because I served on a lot of boards and community planning groups, and we reached out to ARC with grant requests. Sometimes we were fortunate and got them, and sometimes we weren't. But Joe said after my appointment that I had been in training all of my life for this job, and I thought, "Well, I think you're right, and I guess I'm glad I've lived long enough to get the job." I did not realize that the federal co-chair of ARC comes and goes with the president. But the staff – researchers, data analysts, project evaluators, communications personnel and those working parts of ARC – that

is a well-oiled machine that just keeps running. When the federal co-chair comes on, the job is to hit the road running and learn as you go. So, although I was aware of the commission's good works, I was not aware of the magnitude of the scope of work it does throughout the region that's so important.

**HL:** *Sen. Robert Byrd, who served as a senator of West Virginia from 51 years until his death in 2010, was a key leader of keeping funding for ARC through many years. West Virginia has always been critically important, but is it correct that you're the first federal co-chair from that state?*

**GM:** Yes, I am. Not the first woman but the first co-chair from West Virginia, which I found a little surprising because West Virginia is the only state totally within the Appalachian region. But you make a great point: I think when Senator Byrd served, he saw himself as the caretaker of West Virginia, and West Virginia didn't need anybody else. I'm sure if he had wanted an ARC federal co-chair, he would have made that happen.

**HL:** *Let's get back to the highway system. Do you see a parallel between the 1965 Appalachian Development Highway System and the broadband initiative you launched in 2022?*

**GM:** I think there's so much parallel. Think again about the Appalachian Mountains, where it was difficult to build concrete highways, and I think

we find we have the same problems in trying to build a broadband highway. That and the fact that West Virginia communities are so rural. West Virginia is a good template for rural America. There aren't a lot of urban areas, but obviously there's the state capital and large towns around the state that do probably have good internet access.

But in rural areas, even the middle-mile areas are not being covered because of the terrain, and it's very expensive to go the last mile. Then people say, "I can't afford internet." COVID-19 spotlighted the lack of parity in rural, isolated areas because it showcased the big difference between the haves and have-nots, the urban and the rural.

**HL:** *You've said that within the ARC region, you see as a need for member states to think about joining forces, not operating as 13 separate entities. Can you elaborate?*

**GM:** After COVID-19 abated, I was able to start traveling to the states and seeing wonderful projects in all of them. But they were very much state-centered projects. Thirteen states were doing some great things, but they didn't know what other states were doing. No one was able to appreciate that they could share and do some of the same things.

Going back to the rural, isolated areas in Appalachia, I think about how neighbors always took care of neighbors because they had no

one else to depend on – I think it’s inherent in the culture and heritage of Appalachia to do that.

I don’t think it’s a far stretch to say that we could do that at a much bigger level – *if* our communities could join forces. I think rural broadband is one of the best arenas for this to happen because it just makes sense that it’s easier for a provider to come in and do a whole area than it is to come in and try to do each small, individual community.

ARC started the multistate Appalachian Regional Commission Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) projects, and the first one is a broadband project called Connect Humanity. We gave Connect Humanity \$6.3 million to help the 50 most underserved communities throughout the region access broadband and connectivity. The individual communities don’t have the experience or the wherewithal to know how to go about writing grant proposals to get broadband funding, so this helps solve that problem. I’m excited about the fact that our very first multistate grant was all around broadband activity.

**HL:** *Traditionally, internet broadband telecommunications are driven by the provider; if a provider doesn’t see a profit to provide service in a community, then it leaves that community out. Is one goal of ARISE to help engage local leadership in the quest to provide broadband in their communities?*

**GM:** Sure. As Connect Humanity started selecting the 50 communities, it tried to select them regionally so that one community could be a hub to bring in other communities. Once one community knew what to do, it could share that information with surrounding communities. So, yes, that’s the whole point: The network can continue to grow.

**HL:** *Do you think there’s a little bit of competition at play in that if one*

*community is able to get broadband, then the leaders in other communities want to figure out how?*

**GM:** Absolutely, and certainly people who live in communities without broadband are going to be looking to their leaders and asking, “What’s wrong? Why don’t we have it?” What I want to encourage is healthy competition that really pushes people to work together, not a competition in which they have to fight one another.

**HL:** *Can you provide an update on other funding and projects?*

**GM:** The ARC annual 2022 data report on Appalachia showed that 85 percent of households nationwide have broadband, but more than 19 percent of households in Appalachia totally lack broadband or lack the ability to get onto broadband. The digital divide is very apparent.

The ARISE project is brand-new and its funding came about because of the bipartisan Infrastructure Act. Prior to ARISE, POWER Grants provided funding for projects. For instance, in Garrett County, Maryland, roughly 6,000 people were unserved. The county received a \$435,000 ARC power grant to help install a 7,500-foot broadband conduit to serve more than 300 homes.

ARC Power Grants were created to revitalize communities that the coal industry had impacted in some way. In some communities, coal mines closed; in others, subsidiary industries supported coal. Consider Unicoy County, Tennessee, classified as an at-risk county. It got a POWER Grant; Erwin Utilities was able to install 35 miles of fiber optic cable to serve two underserved communities, Temple Hill and Bumpets Cove. Thirty businesses and 680 homes were connected. This shows that smaller grants certainly make a big difference.

A second POWER Grant enabled the French Broad Electric Membership Corporation to deploy

120 miles of broadband fiber across Unicoy County in Tennessee and Madison County in North Carolina. This shows that sometimes working across state lines enables bigger projects to become possible.

So yes, POWER Grants in our coal-impacted regions enabled communities to start getting that broadband before ARISE even came out.

**HL:** *How successful have ARC communities been in building partnerships? What should they do better in the future?*

**GM:** To get a grant, a community has to bring together its business leaders, educational leaders and other stakeholders, and it needs to have a plan. It needs to ask questions: What is it trying to do? Is it attempting a downtown revitalization? Is it recruiting a new industry to come in? Does it need new buildings or training through a college or community college? Everyone must agree to the plan and put money on the table. And then the community can take the plan to the state, and once the state agrees it is good, it can be presented to ARC.

Over the past couple of years, the number of grants to ARC increased, and the quality has improved. We believe this is due in part to a community capacity training program that we instituted when all the infrastructure money came out. In some underserved communities, one person may serve in every job in the community and not know how to apply for or administer a federal grant. These people may have been afraid to spend the money for fear they would spend it wrong and then have to give it back.

The training offered to elected officials, nonprofit organizations and small foundations helped, as did reaching out to academic institutions and local development district (LDD) people. What we’re finding is the LDDs are working more together; they’re reaching out.

I think that we're beginning to see a process that will continue to expand and grow because it's successful.

**HL:** *ARC money is especially impactful because it can be used to match federal money. Why is that important?*

**GM:** We continue to make sure that our states know that they can secure ARC money to use as a match to secure bigger grants they may be eligible for. Sometimes that is critical because one issue with writing a grant is being able to get a match. I encourage ARC states to work together. But it's equally important for federal agencies to work together. I have gone out of my way to reach out to federal agencies to say, "Here's what I can do to help, and how can we work together?"

A great example of this is that we recently started working with the Consumer Outreach Division of the FCC to raise awareness that the FCC has \$14 billion set aside for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). As I mentioned earlier, sometimes a provider gets out to the last mile, and then a family says it can't afford it. The ACP provides a stipend of up to \$30 a month – not just once but every month – to pay for internet connectivity. Across Appalachia, probably at least 3.5 million households qualify for the ACP benefit, but only about 41 percent of those people have applied. You have to figure that it's because a whole lot of people don't know about it or don't know how to go about applying.

ARC partnered with the FCC and coordinated a tour through Maryland, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio and met with more than 65 local leaders to help them develop an outreach and enrollment campaign for the ACP. That's important because it's frustrating when you know there's money there and you know that some people qualify for it – so how do you make sure they get connected?

Some people think, "I don't need this" or "Why would I want to have this?" They do not realize the significance for their children or grandchildren. They're not going to pay a whole lot of attention to a stranger, so having people from the community reach out and explain the importance of internet and how they can get this money to help pay for it is really important. We have to remember to meet people where they are.

**HL:** *President Biden has stated that high-speed broadband is no longer a luxury but an "absolute necessity" and pledged that every household in the U.S. will have access by 2030. Do you really think it's possible to get broadband into every household and to every resident in Appalachia so people at least have the choice to subscribe to the service and access the internet?*

**GM:** The president has been so generous and so focused on making sure that the rural U.S. receives the amount of funding it needs to make it happen – maybe for the first time in history. When electricity was discovered, people found a way to make sure that every home in America had electricity. So shame on us if we can't figure out how to use the abundance of funding that the president has been so gracious and generous with. How can we come together and connect that money and then connect our families?

**HL:** *Many people who left Appalachia want to come back home, and many others want to move there for the quality of life. To attract people, the area must have access to broadband,*

*which will grow the region economically, culturally and from a quality of life standpoint. Is that a part of your dream?*

**GM:** Absolutely. Broadband is not a luxury anymore. It is as essential as electricity and running water. A business is not going to come to an area where there's no internet connectivity. Young people are not going to move to an area where they cannot open up their computer and connect to the world. The community is just going to completely die and go away without connectivity. It is incumbent on all of us to do everything in our power to make this happen. I tell the states all the time that we have more money now than we have ever had – and with it, we have more responsibility and accountability. We can't continue to do what we've always done. We don't need all the extra money if we're just going to continue to do the same thing. We've got to be more visionary. We've got to be more entrepreneurial. And we've got to be more collaborative.

**HL:** *At the end of your term, what would you like to be your No. 1 accomplishment?*

**GM:** I would like to go through the Appalachian region and hear people talking about the great, transformative things happening in the Appalachian region. I don't want to hear them saying, "Oh, this great thing is happening in Ohio" or "This great thing is happening in Pennsylvania." I want to hear, "This is a great thing throughout our Appalachian region." 🙌



*Hilda Legg is a consultant with more than 30 years of experience in the rural infrastructure space and has expertise in ubiquitous high-speed broadband including federal funding, partnership building and strategic planning. She serves as the rural broadband consultant to Broadband Communities Magazine.*