

# In His First 100 Days, Biden Proposes a Transformative, Lasting Broadband Plan

President Biden's infrastructure plan could help communities build future-proof broadband networks that serve their distinct needs.

By Carri Bennet / *Womble Bond Dickinson (US) LLP*

**E**xactly 100 days in, the Biden administration proposed a sweeping infrastructure plan, acknowledging broadband as *the* essential resource for all corners of the U.S. A president particularly focused on his legacy, Biden championed a vast, lasting revitalization of the country's infrastructure with his American Jobs Plan.

The plan seeks to spend \$100 billion on broadband deployment over eight years to provide 100 percent coverage across the U.S. and lower barriers for access to high-speed internet. It's transformative for the country, finally connecting all corners to the internet and especially strengthening many rural communities' paths to economic prosperity.

More than a year after the pandemic forced most people to live and work remotely, it has finally come to everyone's attention that many rural communities have gone unserved or underserved and lack high-speed internet access. This year, rural Americans not served by one of the 1,100 or so rural broadband cooperatives or family-owned companies lost the ability to connect with loved ones, chances for new jobs or businesses and countless economic opportunities.

Without broadband, the disparities will only grow. As people continue to weave internet so deeply and tightly into the fabric of their day-to-day lives, not even farms will look the same.

Farmers are beginning to rely on high-speed internet to grow their crops.

With tools to increase crop yields, use water more efficiently, and grow profitability, most farmers who have access to broadband connectivity will soon utilize precision agriculture and edge computing to improve yield while conserving water and avoiding waste. Farmers won't labor under the hot sun for hours on end but instead use their iPads to check on crops each morning to monitor and adjust fertilizer, water, soil conditions, livestock feed and movement.

Although President Biden's broadband agenda hit a slow start while the nation was consumed with fallout from the Capitol insurrection, impeachment and the COVID-19 relief bill, the Biden administration's sweeping and transformative infrastructure plan has the foundation to finally achieve the bipartisan goal the U.S. has been working toward for years: 100 percent high-speed internet coverage nationwide. The dedicated \$100 billion in the American Jobs Plan will support job creation, businesses, manufacturing, new residents, opportunities for education, and improved access to health care across the country.

## FOCUS ON LOCAL

The Biden plan identifies broadband as the electricity of the 21st century, vowing to use

the arms of government to deploy this crucial resource across the country. This doesn't mean that government will *build* broadband; the government will provide the funding to the private sector to do so.

By proposing to administer funding through local community and state grants, the Biden plan suggests that local communities are better equipped to know where funding needs to be directed and to select and work with providers to build and operate broadband networks that meet their unique needs.

The plan suggests local communities and cooperatives are best suited for working to build and provide these broadband services. Utilizing cooperatives has been incredibly successful. Rural telephone cooperatives and rural electric cooperatives are owned by the communities they serve – the former offer telephone and broadband services, and the latter offer electricity and are now beginning to explore the broadband delivery business.

President Biden's sweeping broadband deployment plan will lay the foundation for internet connectivity across the nation for the next 30 years – if providers deploy broadband infrastructure in a way that will be primed for inevitable and consistent upgrades to their networks. This means future-proofing buildouts by laying the groundwork for upgrades to evolving technology – technology that today may be just a glimmer on the horizon. The concept of future-proofing falls in line with Biden's campaign pledge to "build back better."

By spending the money now to lay enough fiber to support broadband connectivity and wireless connectivity (yes, wireless needs fiber), service providers can be ready for the future and will need to dig trenches only once. In addition, they can future-proof wireless networks by utilizing software and open interface architecture to avoid replacing network hardware on radio towers – they can climb a tower once, then upgrade from 5G to 6G and beyond via software upgrades.

Future-proofing means adopting new architectures such as Open RAN.

### REVITALIZING RURAL AMERICA

Now that President Biden has sent his infrastructure plan to Congress to be drafted into legislation, the key will be in the details – how the support might be divided among communities across the U.S. and how that support will be implemented. Luckily, the administration has indicated its priority will be on flexible funding, leaving much of the decision-making about the needs of specific communities to local leaders.

Similarly, the American Jobs Plan sets aside \$5 billion for a Rural Partnership Program, a project dedicated to supporting rural communities whatever their goals – indicative of the administration's trust in communities to make their own decisions based on their needs.

Within his first 100 days, President

Biden recognized the importance of broadband to the nation's larger infrastructure reform needs, which will overwhelmingly support and revitalize rural areas. High-speed internet can lead to economic prosperity by supporting farming and ranching, creating jobs, bringing manufacturing back to the U.S., and facilitating telehealth and education opportunities.

Most important, broadband will give rural residents the ability to earn higher wages by working remotely while enjoying a lower cost of living. The positive economic repercussions once affordable high-speed broadband is available are unlimited, all thanks to President Biden's American Jobs Plan. ❖

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