

# About \$50 Billion for New Broadband Deployment

Forget the politics. There are issues yet to solve: mapping, disbursement rules, and training enough folks to build new deployments over the next five or six years.

By Steven S. Ross / *Broadband Communities*

**D**one! But not done! With the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (relabelled the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill by the White House), Congress has put enough money on the table to help provide broadband service to every premises in the U.S. – if the broadband industry, state and local officials, and the federal government get the details right. In addition, almost \$15 billion is available for monthly subsidies and internet training for families on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The links highlighted in the box on the following page lead to my recent Bandwidth Hawk columns on broadband funding details and to two significant efforts by the Fiber Broadband Association (FBA) and the Fiber Optic Association (FOA) to train personnel necessary to get the job done. We're talking about 850,000 additional worker-years by 2025, or about 300,000 new jobs that pay around \$80,000 a year now. Ideally, the new jobs will need filling starting at the end of 2022 as money is released for deployments.

Where will the money go? The rules were already being written by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) at the Department of Commerce. But with the final passage of the new law, NTIA has just six months to get the job done – until early May 2022. Maps showing where broadband is already deployed and where there is a need are critical to NTIA's efforts. The maps do not yet exist. The FCC has been working on them for almost a year and promises arrival in the second quarter of 2022. But as this is written, the agency has not chosen a contractor to help. Its request for proposals is unanswered.

Crowdsourcing and state mapping might help. Indeed, they will have to help. But even now, the FCC is mired in certifying winners for its first Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) round and sending winners the first allocations of \$9 billion in subsidies over the next 10 years. Another round, almost \$11 billion, is on hold until certification is done. The winners are on hold, too. They can't apply for Infrastructure Act funding until they know for sure they've been turned down by RDOF.

## TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND

The training issue may be easier to solve. FOA lists 70 (mainly community college) programs on its website and recently worked especially closely with educators in Kentucky and Ohio. It has 30 years' experience in this area. FBA has gone the internship route with the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). The DOL route tends to be more cumbersome. Internships usually have to be lined up before classes begin. Employment awaits winners of Infrastructure Act grants, or their contractors, so the contractors will be carrying the load, at least to start. But the DOL also has existing funding mechanisms and the interest of craft unions. FBA's first program, 144 hours of classroom instruction and 2,000 hours of internship, just started at Wilson College, North Carolina.

It was perhaps a bit easier in 2005, when Verizon started Fios deployment and enticed community colleges to retrain copper technicians in fiber. I completed a 70-hour outside plant fiber training over 10 days with employees of Verizon and its contractors at Southern New Hampshire Technical. I did seven days of inside plant training as well, not quite finishing. I was a licensed electrician in my college days and found the classes stimulating and fun.

As of early November, 26 states and territories had set up offices to plan for NTIA grants. Another 15 or so included broadband in multifunctional agencies. They all await NTIA's oversight and guidance.

## RARE BIPARTISAN SUPPORT

This is all for real. Historically, infrastructure bills have been bipartisan. Bridges, highways, mass transit and now broadband are all quite popular. But this is the first big infrastructure bill passed in 30 years as each significant party tries to make the other look bad. The bill quickly passed the Senate with 50 Democratic and 19 Republican votes. It squeaked through the House, with six progressive Democrats holding it hostage over a more extensive package of "people programs" that had yet to be voted on. But 13 Republicans stepped forward.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Are you interested in training?

- 1 Contact the Fiber Optic Association (FOA) before going to your local community college at [info@foa.org](mailto:info@foa.org), 1-760-990-3936 or [www.foa.org](http://www.foa.org). See page 48 for more.
- 2 To learn about the FBA OpTIC training program, see the October issue: <https://tinyurl.com/y4pew6je>.

Bandwidth Hawk: New Broadband Funding, New Ways to Finance Deployments – <https://tinyurl.com/5ba2fdxt>

Bandwidth Hawk: More Federal Money for Broadband, Greater Role for States – <https://tinyurl.com/53rpm525>

Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo – <https://tinyurl.com/2r6dr59r>

Another dozen Republicans pledged to vote in favor if their votes were needed. How do I know? At the request of various members and staffers, I

prepared studies of 28 congressional districts, showing what the broadband part of the bill was likely to provide for them.

The Republican Party has now blacklisted the 13 and targeted them for defeat in the 2022 primaries. That, in turn, has made some state officials and potential deployers nervous. They should not be. Both parties want the money for their constituents. They don't want the other side to claim an advantage. For which districts did I provide estimates? Their secret is safe with me. I went so far as to use end-to-end encrypted messaging sent to secure addresses, and even was asked to send a few by snail mail. Not even others at the magazine have the list.

That's crazy. But broadband is not! ❖

Contact the Hawk at [steve@bbcmag.com](mailto:steve@bbcmag.com)



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