

Respected members of the Arlington County Board:

My name is Tim Dempsey, and I am speaking on behalf of the ArlFiber Collective. We are a group of mostly Arlington residents that have spent the last year and half exploring how we can bridge the digital divide in Arlington and provide low-cost, high-speed internet service to the whole community, starting with the most underserved.

While we were making some modest progress on a community broadband project, the onset of the pandemic and the ensuing mass transition to online life, particularly as concerns school and health care, made us realize that there needed to be immediate, comprehensive action by an entity with far more resources and expertise than we had: namely Arlington County.

In that regard, we welcome and support the proposed feasibility study, as we agree with staff that this is likely to be the most expedient path forward in terms of helping the most people in the shortest amount of time. Moreover, we think that it has the potential to provide very valuable data that could better inform a strategic vision for expanding reliable and qualitative access throughout the county.

Strategic vision, however, is the key term here. We believe that this study should be expanded to explore whether a broadband authority could be used as the vehicle to execute this project and replicate it elsewhere.¹ Alternatively, we would ask that you commission a separate study looking at the use of a broadband authority to build a county-wide, fiber-to-the-home, open access, software defined network that would provide service to whomever it wants and to whomever wants it. Under this model, infrastructure is separated from services, allowing the public to own, build out, and maintain the telecommunications infrastructure, while allowing private entities to compete virtually over that public infrastructure to provide service.² This model was pioneered by the city of Ammon in Idaho, which is now deemed to have the cheapest high-speed internet service in the world(!).³ Several cities similar in size to Arlington are now studying how to emulate it.⁴

We believe this model will be more sustainable in the long run. It would balance public investment and control with private innovation while also creating a larger base of subscribers, whereby institutional and wealthier segments of the subscriber base could potentially help subsidize the poorer segment, with the former still paying far lower costs for superior service. It is even possible that we could replicate Ammon's debt free approach to building the network through local improvement districts.⁵

In closing, we ask you to think big and strategically and consider the possibilities and benefits, not just the barriers and the costs. Thank you for your attention.

In solidarity,

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¹ A broadband authority is the name typically given to a “Wireless Service Authority” here in Virginia. There are already dozens of authorities operating through the state with varying subscriber bases. For a useful summary of the law that allows localities to form broadband authorities, see “Wireless Services Authorities Act, Virginia,” §15.2-5431.1 et seq., Virginia’s Legislative Information Service, 2003, <https://bit.ly/37CHypo>. The law firm Hefty & Wiley, P.C. has produced a useful FAQ on this law. See Gore, Jeffrey, *Wireless Service Authorities and the Virginia Wireless Service Authority Act*, Virginia Association of Counties, 2008, <https://bit.ly/33czKqJ>.

² Leerssen, Paddy and David A. Talbot, “Enabling Competition & Innovation on a City Fiber Network”, Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society Research Paper, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3dGEHPk>. See also Woodruff, Jay, “The city with the best fiber-optic network in America might surprise you.” *Fast Company*. 21 October 2019. <https://bit.ly/353oT40>.

³ Chao, Becky and Lukas Pietrzak, “The Cost of Connectivity in Ammon, Idaho”, Open Technology Institute, January 2020, <https://bit.ly/2HeWxxg>.

⁴ See Appendix V of this document for an example.

⁵ Trostle, Hannah, “Ammon’s Local Improvement District Gets City Council Blessing”, *Community Networks*, June 8, 2016, <https://bit.ly/31ld3Tm>.