

OPINION

Funds will not magically create broadband

Commissioners need full participation of many sectors to connect Dallas County

By J.J.KOCH and THERESA DANIEL

After passing in the U.S. Senate this summer, the much-awaited infrastructure bill has passed in the House. News reports breathlessly listed what it may cover — roads, bridges, etc. — and broadband!

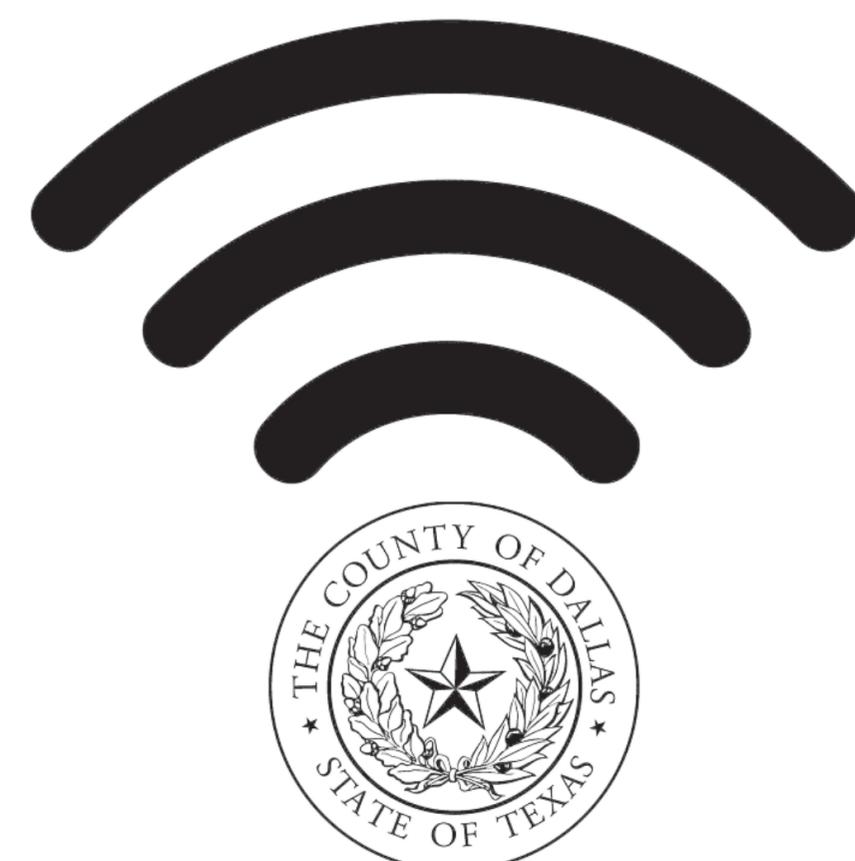
After living through the past 20 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can all rattle off why broadband is critical to life today. If you were working remotely or looking for work, you needed fast, dependable broadband. If your children were attending school online, you needed dependable broadband and enough devices to accommodate the family and the savvy to navigate it. And these are just for starters.

Devices using these services now come in all forms: phones, tablets, computers and their home-based sibling devices from Amazon, Google and Apple. Further, the Federal Communications Commission and Health and Human Services have jointly issued a memorandum, for the first time ever, stating that access to broadband is a “super-determinant of health.”

Bottom line: Broadband is crucial to a full, modern life.

Past efforts for universal broadband access have, in our opinion, failed for several reasons. There has not been a clear view of how broadband is defined. Pre-pandemic, there was not widespread government support, which is critical both in understanding what to pursue and what not to pursue.

Industry and government had not migrated completely to online information and services. The link between broadband and education was not well understood before the pandemic, nor was the link between broadband and health care. These links are clear now. Further, business leaders also see opportunities both to help and to make money. This



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is one area where Dallas County can lead and innovate.

Now that the \$1 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act has passed, does that mean access is around the corner? Not at all. Dallas County Commissioners have embarked on a far-sighted effort to define what our goals are and how to bring together a working coalition of public and nonprofit entities and private companies to commit to a realistic plan.

We held the initial meeting in October with the support of all the Dallas County commissioners. Attendees represented the city of Dallas, Dallas ISD and other neigh-

boring school districts, nonprofit entities such as United Way and Dallas Foundation, advocacy and policy groups such as North Texas Innovation Alliance, and representatives from the private sector.

The goal of the briefing was to put all attendees on the same page with the same understanding of the current situation and an agreed-upon goal. That is, broadband should be available to 95% of area residents, and it should be obtainable and affordable, costing no more than 2% of after-tax income.

Available, obtainable and affordable. These are the three important words. Many areas, particularly rural communities and

urban underserved neighborhoods, have none of these. Some have available service in theory, but it is not obtainable in their buildings. Some have obtainable service, but it is not affordable.

The federal government dumping millions of dollars into a state will not solve these issues. Instead, it will take all the potential public entities such as cities, counties, school districts and all the private companies to compose a granular plan. We must identify where access should be located or expanded and to devise a fair plan for participation, including financial help for those who need it.

All members of the Commissioners Court agree that many residents throughout the county lack the most basic access, and often the service they do have fails to meet 2010 FCC broadband standards.

We must spend the allocated funds wisely and ensure capable businesses of all sizes participate in the solution. We have every opportunity now with mapping, measurement tools and expert counsel to confirm that funds deployed create obtainable services.

We already see some of this promise in a pilot program with DISD. But, with our effort, the pilot must be expanded. This is not the job of the federal government or even the state of Texas.

Our first report to the residents of Dallas County and North Texas is one of qualified optimism and unqualified enthusiasm. We know what our job is, and we have taken the unprecedented step of allocating \$35 million to broadband expansion.

But Dallas County residents have a responsibility, too. This is a complex undertaking, requiring participation and support from this wide, ungainly coalition of disparate players. Your understanding, input and support is necessary.

Competing narratives are already circulating: Service should be free, broadband is a “right,” private companies just need funds to create networks, etc. These simplistic, one-size-fits-all ideas miss the mark. As Dallas County commissioners, we commit to keeping you up-to-date regularly.

J.J.Koch and Theresa Daniel are Dallas County commissioners. They wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.

State of The City

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