

# Willcox to receive fiber optic infrastructure investment

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**WILLCOX** – The Arizona Commerce Authority has awarded Valley Telecom Group a grant comprised of federal and state funds to build broadband infrastructure to underserved communities, including Willcox.

The ACA announced the awardees of the AZ State Broadband Development Grant Program on July 10.

Valley Telecom was awarded three grants for "fiber investment" in Santa Cruz County near Patagonia, the city of Safford and a rural area just west of Willcox.

The investment will bring 43 miles of 100% fiber optic internet to 8.2 square miles just west of Interstate 10 along Willcox.

The project will connect more than 500 households at a cost of \$3,275,206, with Valley contributing \$297,746 of the investment.

The grant will boost local broadband infrastructure investment. It will enhance the speed and reach of high-speed internet for customers. It has the capacity to strengthen economic growth, thereby improving the economic conditions and quality of life in rural Cochise County.

“Many areas the city is annexing do not have fiber,” Willcox Mayor Mike Laws said. “The Fiber Investment for West Willcox Rural Community project is essential and will provide additional housing options to our local workforce and will continue to spur economic development in Cochise County.”

The project will include the city’s Quail Park, where increasing internet access to this community resource would be a benefit.

“Inadequate broadband services marginalize our rural residents. These projects help to close the digital divide in Patagonia and the rural area west of Willcox,” wrote Randy Heiss, executive director of the Southeastern Arizona Governments Organization in a letter to the ACA supporting the project.

“Providing high quality internet access enhances opportunities for education, telemedicine and connection to a broader society,” Heiss stated.

“What we have right now is OK, but it’s wireless, it can be inconsistent,” said Louise Walden, owner of Walden Aviation and manager of Cochise County Airport, an early supporter of the fiber optic investment grant. The airport sits on the boundary of the proposed project area.

“Having access to high-speed internet empowers us to serve those who use Cochise County Airport at a higher level,” Walden said.

The airport is the base for more than 30 aircraft and home to Flight Fundamentals Inc., a flight school.

The school specializes in advanced flight instruction and specialty training.

“We can take you all the way to the airlines,” said Brett Bossert, FFI flight instructor.

He sees the improvements in infrastructure as only a positive. FFI, like most modern businesses, relies increasingly on being connected to the internet.

Bossert said, “It’s definitely going to help out, with updating our databases, avionics, and maintaining contact with our online scheduling, billing and even maintenance.”

Willcox Unified School District Superintendent Kevin Davis was a proponent of the project since it was announced. The school district serves more than 1,000 students, with about 19% below the poverty line.

In a letter in support of the fiber optic project Davis highlighted the need for the improvements and wrote of the impact the COVID pandemic restrictions had on students.

“The difference in attendance and absorption of material for students with quality internet services versus those with lower quality in services was dramatic,” said Davis.

While the schools have returned to in-person learning, Davis said the differences still exist and are experienced daily by students needing to access resources and doing homework.

“I’m glad to see Arizona being proactive and making the necessary investment in internet services, especially in rural areas,” Davis wrote.