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Targeted Internet Adoption in Georgetown County, South Carolina

Alexandra Matu

August 9, 2021

## **Introduction and Project Thesis**

Horry Telephone Cooperative, Inc. (HTC) is a local telecommunications cooperative that has been at the forefront of broadband internet expansion into Georgetown County, South Carolina. Broadband internet “refers to high-speed internet access that is always on and faster than the traditional dial-up access” which include, “several high-speed transmission technologies such as Digital Subscriber Line (DSL), Cable Modem, Fiber, Wireless, Satellite, or Broadband over Powerlines (BPL)” (FCC, 2014). This report will examine all aspects of HTC’s broadband internet expansion into Georgetown County, including accessibility, affordability, and adoption. While all aspects will be examined, an emphasis will be placed on adoption, as that was the major focus of my internship. I began my summer by collecting demographic data on Georgetown County and analyzing it to give me better insight into the communities of the county. HTC provided me with much of the numerical and statistical data that I needed however I collected all the journalistic data. Most of my summer was spent interviewing influential members of the community to gain a better understanding of the digital needs in each pocket of Georgetown. I met with individuals such as Ray Funney in Plantersville, Reverend Dr. Sandy Drayton, and Mayor Brendon Barber in Georgetown Proper so that they could give me firsthand accounts of the digital adoption disparities that their communities face. Once I had established what the internet adoption needs in communities were, I continued my research process by conducting extensive outreach with churches, community centers, and other local hubs to help understand what the best approach would be to explain internet adoptability. Once I determined correlations and causations, I created a targeted approach, or a tailored education plan, that will help educate the public on internet adoptability. This education plan will be specific to each area of Georgetown County based on my research and outreach findings. It will be a few pages long

and will be based on previous plan created for Horry County. While I was only tasked with creating the education plan, implementation was another big issue that we needed to tackle. Originally, I was going to hand this project off to a different intern however, towards the end of the summer, my sponsor and I decided that it would be best for me to stay on through the fall to help with the implantation of my education plan. I will be staying on at HTC at least through the fall to help with the implementation of my educational plan.

### **Relation to SDGs:**

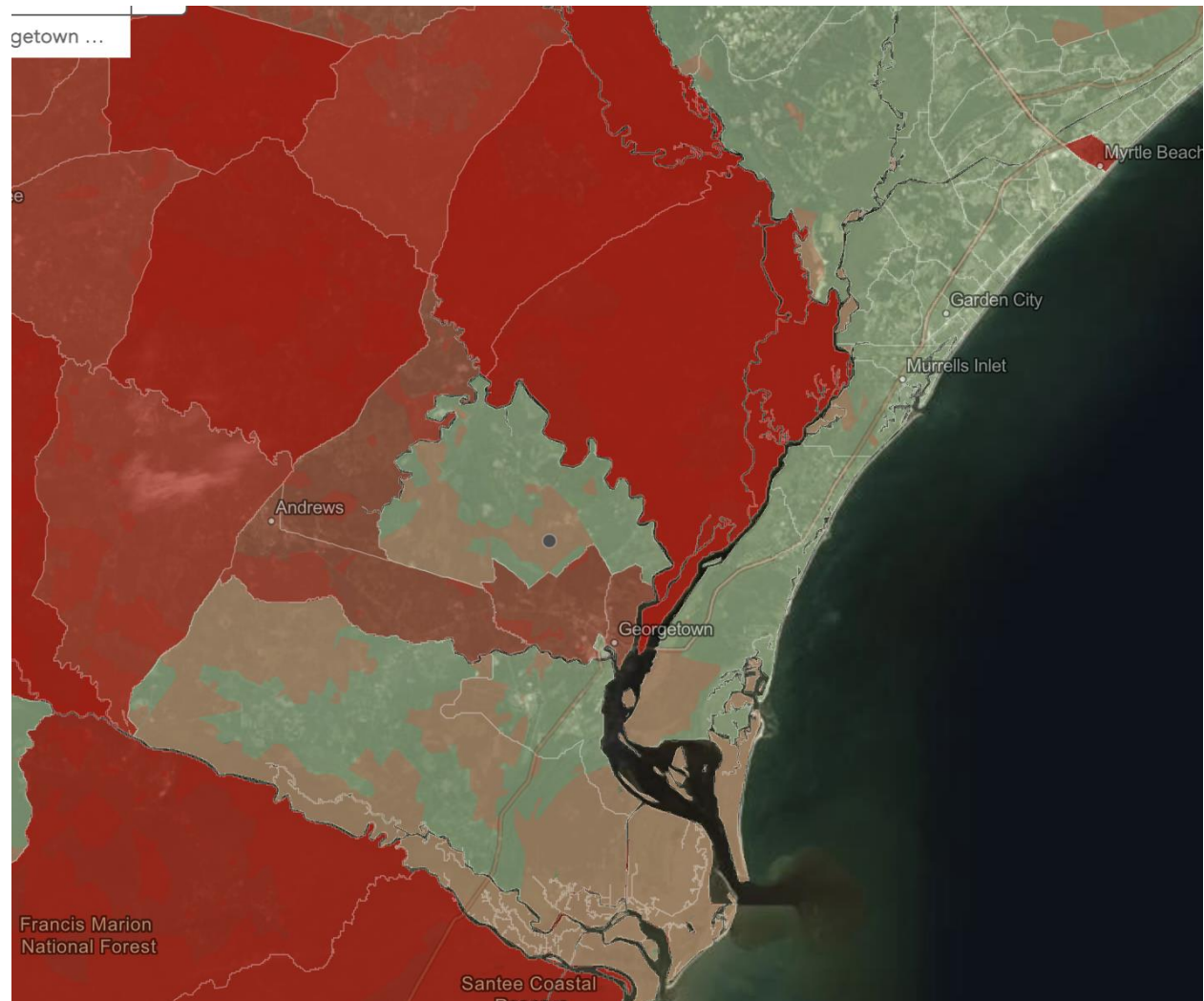
The SDG that best relates to my internship and its goals is Goal 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure. It relates to this because the main goal of HTC is to provide internet, cable, and telephone service to Horry County and its surrounding areas. The targets of Goal 9 directly reference providing internet to less served communities. Specifically, SDG 9 strives to “Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020”. (UN, 2021) My internship is doing exactly what this statement is describing. I am helping provide Broadband internet service to less served communities in Georgetown County. This will increase individuals’ access to information and communications via the internet. The initiative also strives to make internet access as affordable as possible to these communities. While I was not directly involved with the infrastructure side of things at HTC, I did sit in on quite a few meetings about their plans to build out into the county. My focus was on what happens after the infrastructure is built and the internet is readily available. Sure, it’s nice to have the internet available, but what if you don’t know how to use it? It essentially becomes obsolete and useless to those who do not know what the internet can do. I was tasked with educating those individuals, essentially teaching them how to access and use the infrastructure that HTC will be

building, which is just as important as building the infrastructure itself. Without the knowledge of how to use the internet, individuals do not see the need for it. My work combatted this specific issue, educating individuals on the importance of this necessity. While I was not the one who was directly implementing the SGD without my work, many would not partake in the new resources available to them. My work was an essential aid to helping individuals across the county understand the importance of the internet thus supporting the SDG as it is being built and implemented in Georgetown County.

### **County and Project Overview**

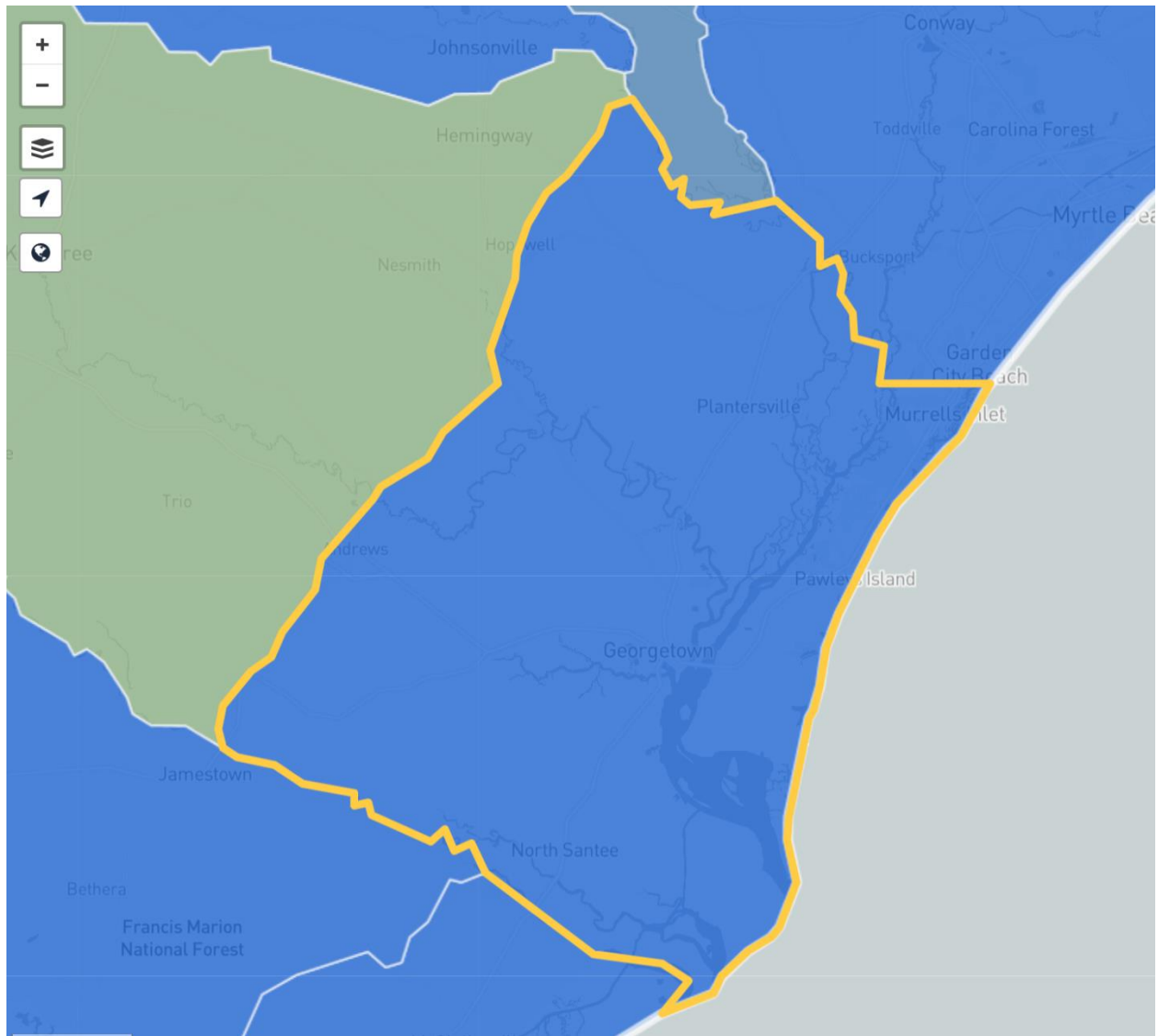
The Broadband Initiative seeks to provide accessible and affordable internet to rural areas across the nation. By doing this, the initiative seeks to promote economic growth, job acquisition, access to healthcare, upon many other goals. In South Carolina, specifically in the rural areas of Georgetown County, this initiative has been a foremost issue since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as internet has become a necessity. Since children have needed it for school and parents have needed it for work, internet access is just as important as running water. In rural areas of Georgetown County, many are going without adequate internet service. While some attempts have been made to help remedy this issue, none have come to full fruition thus far. In June 2021, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration released a map that displays indicators of need across the nation. This map was created in hopes of jumpstarting more funding initiatives for areas in need of better connectivity.

This map showcases Georgetown County's indicators of need:



The red indicates where areas in need of service, the deeper the red, the greater the need. This map was created based on internet speed test data collected across the county. Most of the northern part of the county is completely unserved, meaning they have absolutely no service. However, many of the areas that are not red, do not have adequate service either. While this map is a great example of the NTIA and the federal government taking steps towards remedying the issues, it is still inaccurate which will lead to inaccuracies in funding and expansion. The FCC also published a map in attempts to highlight broadband internet availability in Georgetown

County:



*Source:*

The map created by the FCC is almost completely inaccurate. The blue indicates that the area has access to benchmark broadband internet speeds, which we can see from the NTIA map, is simply not accurate. Many areas where residents have claimed to have no services are marked as having service on the FCC map. This is a major issue because providers are not able to determine which areas need to be served if maps are incorrect. Furthermore, it becomes confusing when maps do

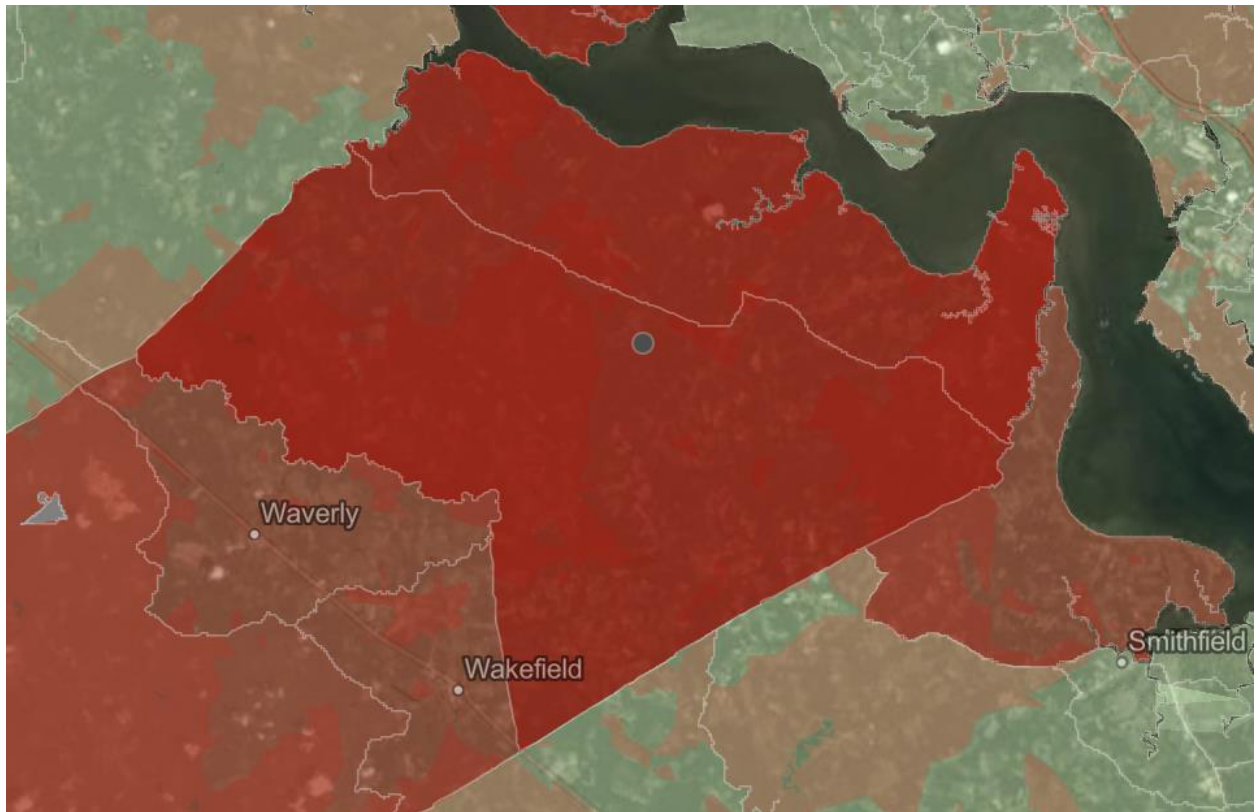
not give the same outlook of an area. This makes expansion even harder because there are so many inaccuracies in data on who has service and who doesn't.

In recent years, HTC has worked diligently to expand South Carolina's Broadband initiatives into Horry County. More recently, they have worked to implement the same initiatives into Georgetown County. The targeted education plan I have created with HTC addresses all of the issues that come with internet expansion. While HTC is expanding their internet services, many people are troubled with actually using the internet. This problem is especially prevalent among older communities. I mean, if you have never had regularly available internet access, how are you supposed to know how to use it? My plan provides individuals with answers to the questions. The structure of the plan is as follows: one in-person session a week over the course of six weeks. There will be six sessions total, each with a different focus: introductory how to use the internet, education, health/wellness, job skills, entertainment, cell phone usage. The sessions will all last an hour and will be held after school so that families with children will be able to attend as well. We decided that this would be the best approach after our meetings with individuals in the community. We leaned on them for best topics to teach about as well as best ways to implement events like this. We are hoping to begin with our implementation either late fall 2021 or early 2022, it will all depend on COVID.

## **Literature Review**

While HTC is working on broadband expansion in Georgetown County, many initiatives like theirs are being conducted throughout the nation. One example we see of broadband expansion happening currently is in Surry County, Virginia. Surry County's broadband accessibility is almost identical to Georgetown County's:

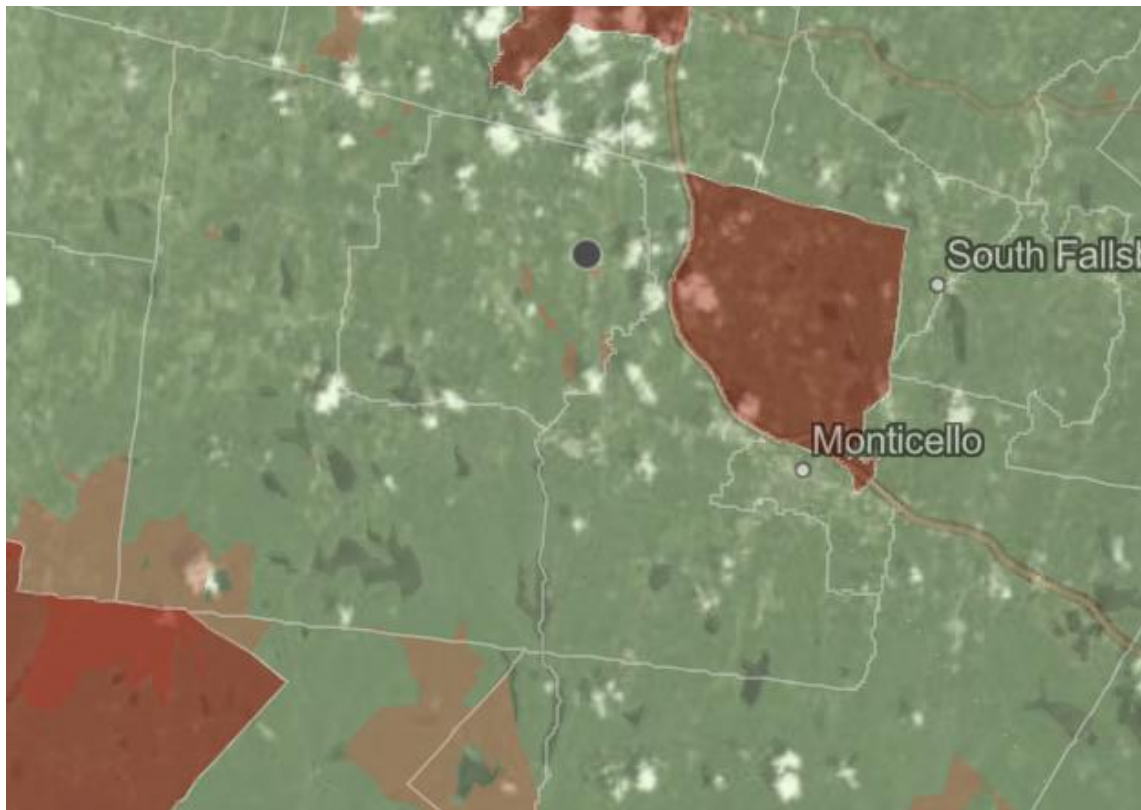




Much of the county is painted red, meaning no access to adequate broadband internet. They are in the same predicament as Georgetown County, trying to roll out broadband infrastructure as quick as they can. They describe the importance of broadband by stating it “can provide you with the technical capability to access a wide range of resources, services, and products that can enhance your life in a variety of ways” (Surry County, 2020). Surry County officials, just like those in Georgetown County, understand the importance of broadband expansion and availability. The main difference between expansion in Surry County and Georgetown County is the way that each went about deciding what was important in implementation. To clarify, the rural residents of Surry County were the ones who designed their broadband adoption plan, not a local provider. While both counties let locals take over the process of adoption, HTC is heading the initiatives in Georgetown County, not the residents themselves. Surry County writes “In attempting to address these challenges, some rural communities have found it helpful to develop

a strategic plan for broadband deployment that includes creating a comprehensive business proposal to broadband providers. Such a plan, for example, could demonstrate to broadband providers that deployment is a sound business decision that would benefit both the providers and the community” (Surry County, 2020). HTC essentially bypassed using all the residents in rural areas of Georgetown County and only interviewed some individuals. Surry County handed the project over completely to residents who then turned around and provided information to local providers. While both are valid attempts at solving the issue, I think that Surry County’s efforts may have been too localized. By asking each individual in a rural area for their opinion, the process gets drawn out meaning residents will go longer without adequate service.

Another attempt like this was made in Sullivan County, New York. Unlike the NTIA maps of the other two counties, most of Sullivan County is painted contains no red:



This county took a completely different approach from both Georgetown and Surry Counties and created a specific organization tasked with combatting broadband expansion, the Sullivan Broadband Local Development Corporation (LDC). The LDC describes itself as “a local development corporation created pursuant to the not-for-profit corporation law of the State of New York” which seeks to “improve access to high-speed broadband internet service to residents, businesses, not-for-profits, and other community members in Sullivan County, NY” (LDC, 2021). As proven by the comparison of NTIA, this organization has done their job extremely well. They have eliminated almost all the red areas in Sullivan County, essentially providing all residents with adequate service. While these maps are not entirely accurate, this approach of tackling broadband expansion proves to be the most effective.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Moving forward, I believe that internet access needs to become a necessity, not a luxury. Since taking office in January, the Biden administration has made many strides in securing funding for broadband internet expansion into rural areas, but this is just not enough. No grassroots work has been with local communities to determine the specific needs for each community. Rural areas in Tennessee may not need the same type of expansion that rural South Carolina does. This administration has turned broadband into a blanket term, hoping that it encompasses all issues and needs. However, this is just not the case. Local providers, like HTC, have been speaking out and advocating about the need for broadband internet far before it became a political hot topic with COVID. Now that this administration is catching on, it is a little too late. Many communities, including many areas of Georgetown County, struggled with internet access throughout the pandemic. Some found themselves driving to offices, libraries, etc. just for a reliable internet connection. Now that the pandemic seems to be on the downturn, many

individuals still find themselves struggling to maintain regular internet connectivity. The best way to combat these issues is to release control of expansion into the hands of local providers. These providers are the ones who have the best insight into the needs of their communities. They know who needs what, where things need to be improved, and so on. They are the most in touch with struggling communities because they themselves live and experience the issues that they are striving to fix. New policies need to be implemented that call directly on local providers for their insight. Furthermore, these providers need to be called upon frequently, so that as things change and improve, and more appropriate policies can be implemented. The only issue with this is that things like this take time. By the time new data is collected it will be outdated. There is no simple solution but handing over control to local companies is the best place to start, and the government can build out new policies and recommendations from there as things improve.

## **Conclusion**

Broadband internet is more polarized than it ever has been before, and the need for internet will only continue to grow with time. Especially now with COVID, internet access is a necessity. It is virtually impossible to sustain life outside of your home without it. From paying bills to job hunting, the internet is the main tool needed to help individuals on a day-to-day basis. My work with HTC is just one example of local providers across the nation trying to close the digital divide and provide everyone with adequate internet service. The internet is a necessity in every part of the country, no matter the state or geographic location. While there have been many strides recently in efforts to close the digital divide and provide all Americans with broadband internet, there is still much work to be done. Looking locally, Georgetown County especially needs some attention in terms of broadband and HTC has stepped up to provide as best as they can. While they are planning to expand, this is not an immediate fix. Building infrastructure

takes time. Internet education and adoption take time. Initiatives as big as this do not happen overnight, it will take time to get everything, and everyone situated. While the steps being taken by HTC and other local providers are steps in the right direction, by the time these initiatives come to fruition, there may be new needs and technologies that must now be addressed and considered. The issue of broadband internet expansion and adoption will always be prevalent, no matter the lengths gone to address and remedy them. As time goes on, needs will continue to change. This is what makes the issue so hard to fight, it is ever changing. There is no single answer or straight path to solving this issue. However, HTC is one of many examples of local providers doing everything in their power to help bring internet to the rural areas that they serve.

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