



RHODE ISLAND

Broadband and Digital
Equity Strategic Plan **(Draft)**



PREPARING FOR UNPRECEDENTED INVESTMENT

Broadband is essential infrastructure for the 21st century. It enables economic growth, access to education and employment, healthcare, access to news and entertainment, as well as connection to family and friends. In short, broadband is necessary for meaningful participation in society. Yet twenty-five percent of Rhode Islanders do not have wired (cable, fiber-optic or DSL) internet subscriptions at home.¹ In parts of the urban core, that number increases to an astounding fifty percent. High-quality broadband for small businesses is not universally accessible. At a time when internet is a basic utility – for remote work, distance learning, telehealth, engagement with digital government, basic business operations, and so much more – this disparity creates a deep digital divide in the state of Rhode Island. Until every Rhode Islander is connected to reliable, affordable high-speed broadband, the State will not reach its potential for economic growth and universal prosperity.

The depth of Rhode Island's existing infrastructure provides a substantial foundation to build from. The Ocean State Higher Education Economic Development and Administrative Network (OSHEAN) has available middle mile fiber

throughout the state, which broadband providers may lease and expand capacity for residential and business uses. The Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT), the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA), and other public entities also have available fiber which may be used to foster middle mile infrastructure solutions.

Rhode Island is at a historic moment to capitalize on its small geographic size, population density, flat terrain, and middle-mile fiber infrastructure to expand broadband access to unconnected and underconnected populations, leveraging unprecedented levels of federal funding, including from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The State is set to receive at least \$100 million from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA) Broadband Equity, Access & Deployment (BEAD) program in 2023 for investments in last mile broadband infrastructure to bring high-speed, fiber-based service where it is needed the most. The State will also receive Digital Equity Planning and Capacity Grants from the Digital Equity Act (DEA) to plan for and implement digital equity and inclusion initiatives, to be followed by Digital Equity Competitive Grants, which will be open to digital

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), 1-Year Estimates.

inclusion and advancement organizations throughout the state to serve the more than 750,000 Rhode Islanders who are in “Covered Populations” of the DEA. Approximately 164,000 Rhode Island households (approximately 410,000 individuals) are eligible for the \$30-per-month subscription discounts from the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) while funds last. These new sources complement several others from the federal government, including \$25 million that the State has allocated to new broadband infrastructure from the Department of the Treasury’s Capital Projects Fund (CPF), potential funding from the State’s outstanding Economic Development Authority Build Back Better Regional Challenge grant application, and other federal funds, such as the upcoming Smart Grid Investment Grant Program. These sources can be combined with existing state infrastructure and assets, local government funding and infrastructure assets, and private and philanthropic funding to further expand impact.

In the Fall of 2022, the State will receive \$5 million of its minimum allocation of \$100 million from the BEAD program as Initial Planning Funds to develop a “Five-Year Action Plan,” and \$506,000 to develop a “State Digital Equity Plan,” both of which must be submitted to NTIA by mid-2023. Broadband infrastructure and digital

equity are both necessary for universal access and adoption. Recognizing the inextricable link between broadband deployment and digital inclusion programs, and following guidance for linking these two federally-required plans from NTIA, the State plans to use these funds to develop a single ConnectRI Program that will maximize the impact of federal funding and achieve universal connectivity and digital advancement for all Rhode Islanders.

This Rhode Island Broadband and Digital Equity Strategic Plan takes stock of the current state of connectivity in Rhode Island and sets forth the State’s goals and principles for the disbursement of federal funds, as well as the primary work streams that RI Commerce and its new Office of Broadband and Digital Equity will pursue to develop ConnectRI. The primary purpose of this plan is to help build a common understanding among interested stakeholders of the present state of connectivity in the State and the work ahead, setting a foundation for a participatory planning and project delivery process that will rely on the collaborative efforts of numerous governmental agencies, internet service providers (ISPs), and nonprofit and civic institutions across the state.

Specifically, this Strategic Plan provides an overview of:

The Digital Divide in Rhode Island

This summary of Rhode Island’s broadband infrastructure and digital equity conditions, including its strengths and areas for improvement, leverages existing data collection, analysis, and mapping; stakeholder surveys and interviews; and definitions for digital equity, the digital divide, digital skills, and digital literacy. It also identifies additional data collection needs and analyses that are required to fulfill federal funding requirements, maximize available funds, and ensure that the State’s resources are directed where they are needed most and where they can have the greatest impact.

Broadband and Digital Equity Goals and Principles to Guide Investment

ConnectRI will be grounded in principles to help the State reach its connectivity goals, informed by both the State’s needs and federal guidance on disbursement of broadband infrastructure and digital equity funds. These principles and goals will guide the State’s planning, including how to deploy funds for implementation. This Strategic Plan makes these priorities clear both to deliver transparency in the State’s efforts and to equip the State’s delivery partners with a clear understanding of priorities.

The Roadmap for Development and Implementation of ConnectRI

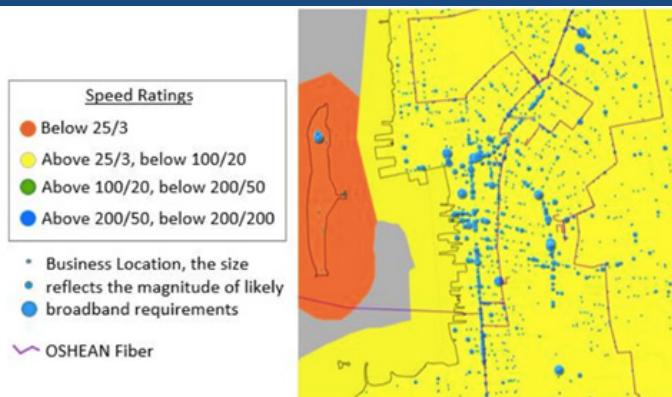
This Strategic Plan establishes Rhode Island’s “plan for planning,” providing all Rhode Islanders insight into the work required over the next year to prepare for the delivery of new broadband infrastructure and digital equity programs, including how they can participate in those planning efforts. Specifically, this plan identifies five Work Streams to help Rhode Island make the greatest progress towards its broadband and digital equity goals and make most out of the historic federal funding.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN RHODE ISLAND

Rhode Island has extensive broadband infrastructure, relative to other states, but there is ample room for improvement – particularly to ensure that federal funds are used to deliver generational upgrades to infrastructure in communities in need across the state, and to ensure that everyone, including the state's businesses, has the tools necessary to benefit from that infrastructure. These are the two components of the digital divide: the availability of high-quality broadband infrastructure and individuals' and businesses' ability to make the effective use of broadband service – including the ability to afford service, and to have access to the computers and other devices to use the internet, as well as the digital skills and tech support that many households need to access digital services from basic email and web browsing to videoconferencing and telehealth.

Broadband infrastructure in the state is relatively good compared to other states, but has significant room for improvement, particularly compared to international competitors and the ever-increasing data demands of households and businesses. For example, although large private businesses, U.S. defense locations, and institutions of higher education generally have access to high-bandwidth, fiber-optic broadband, many small and medium size businesses face broadband capacity constraints, limiting their business potential. In Newport, many small and medium sized businesses operate over the same networks as residential subscribers. Exhibit 1 depicts speed ratings in the Newport area, where business locations are identified by blue dots (sized to the number of employees and their estimated data needs), with OSHEAN middle mile fiber routes overlaid in purple. Currently, many of Newport's businesses depend heavily on reliable broadband access, but poor quality infrastructure is preventing the realization of the area's economic potential.

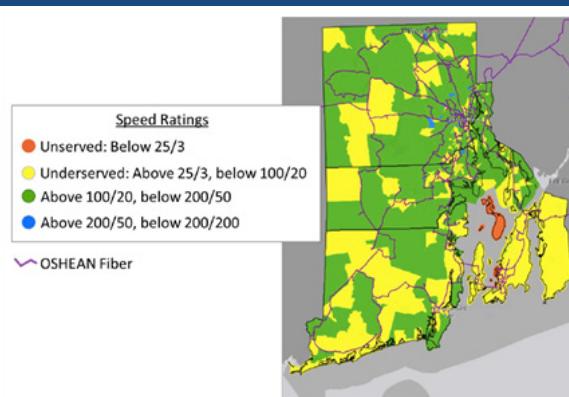
Exhibit 1 – Speed Ratings for Businesses²



Building on new guidance from the federal government, the State recognizes that all Rhode Islanders need reliable access to broadband service of at least 100 megabits-per-second (Mbps) download speeds, and 20 Mbps upload speeds, the new minimum speed recognized by the NTIA and the new threshold speed for broadband currently under consideration by the FCC, but that in the near future, Rhode Islanders should have access to gigabit (1,000 Mbps) or multi-gigabit symmetrical (equivalent download and upload speeds) wherever they are in the state.

Today, infrastructure exists to deliver broadband service of at least 25 megabits-per-second (Mbps) download speeds, and 3 Mbps upload speeds, to 98.6% of the State. This ranks Rhode Island as one of the most connected states in the nation based on a standard for broadband of 25/3 Mbps. Further data collection and analysis is needed to determine the infrastructure gap to deliver 100/20, as estimates range between 1.3% to 33% for households which currently lack that level of service. These statistics alone do not tell the whole truth, as in many instances, advertised speeds do not match the speeds experienced by end-users for many Rhode Islanders. Based on speed ratings calculated by Reid Consulting group (see Exhibit 2 below) areas highlighted in yellow are above 25/3, but still below the 100/20 threshold for BEAD funding and the 100/100 threshold for Capital Projects Fund funding. Very few areas in the state reach 100 Mbps in upload speed, which is the requirement for the use of Capital Project Funds. In Exhibit 2 below, the yellow and orange areas of the state are below 100 Mbps in download speed, as well. Although this threshold has not been adopted across the board, the Treasury's legislative requirement is noteworthy in signaling the direction of further potential federal guidance in the future. All Rhode Islanders deserve more than the current and future baseline federal standards.

Exhibit 2 – Speed Ratings in Census Block Groups³



^{2,3} Mission Broadband, Inc. & Reid Consulting Group. (2022, January). Connect Greater Newport Broadband Report. Connect Greater Newport.

In order to compete effectively for decades to come, the State needs more widespread fiber optic networks, which provide this symmetrical access – the highest quality infrastructure, prioritized by federal funding, and the backbone for businesses, institutions, high-quality home broadband, and next generation wireless networks. Fortunately, the State has a robust “Middle Mile” network – the equivalent of Interstate Highways for the internet – including a significant network owned by the nonprofit Ocean State Higher Education Economic Development and Administrative Network (OSHEAN) and RIPTA. Additionally, an estimated 84.2% of Rhode Islanders have fiber service available, according to BroadbandNow, but may be beholden to only a single provider of fiber-based service. The ideal state would be for multiple options of providers for all residents and businesses to access fiber-based service.

Nonetheless, while the state’s basic broadband infrastructure is robust, cost for service is too high for many of our state’s small businesses and stands as a barrier to service adoption for many Rhode Islanders. Approximately 25 percent of households in the State do not subscribe to wired broadband at home. For households earning less than \$20,000 per year, more than 33 percent do not subscribe to any type of broadband service. A recent survey by Skills for RI’s Future found that half of respondents said

they cannot afford a home broadband connection. A healthy broadband ecosystem requires not only high-quality infrastructure, available everywhere, but also service that is priced affordably enough for universal adoption, combined with device access, digital literacy training, tech support, and digital advancement programs to ensure that all Rhode Islanders can participate in the economy of the 21st Century.

Closing Rhode Island’s digital divide requires knowing where broadband is available, at what speeds, for what costs, as well as the data, device, and skills needs of our state’s residents and businesses. While the FCC will release new, more granular maps of service availability, the State and its localities, businesses, and residents may have a different experience of that availability from the data submitted to the FCC by ISPs – and the FCC welcomes additional submissions of data from the State. Meanwhile, the Digital Equity Act also requires an understanding of broader “barriers to digital equity” that necessitates additional data collection and surveying. Over time, the State will need to evaluate the impact of its investments to ensure they have the intended impact and that delivery partners can be held accountable to their commitments. This Strategic Plan takes sets forth the practical actions to fill knowledge gaps as the basis for more detailed infrastructure and digital equity planning.

GOALS AND PRINCIPLES FOR BROADBAND AND DIGITAL EQUITY INVESTMENTS

Through a series of roundtables with a range of stakeholders held in 2021 and 2022, the State established an overarching statewide broadband and digital equity goal to:

Leverage a best-in-class, resilient, sustainable, and scalable broadband infrastructure to propel the state’s 21st century economics, education, healthcare, civic and social engagement, and quality of life, by ensuring all Rhode Islanders have access to affordable, accessible high-speed internet in their homes, at their places of employment, and at public facilities by 2027.

This Strategic Plan builds on this overarching goal with three specific goals for the use of federal funding:

1. EXPAND FIBER INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE STATE.

Fiber optic cables provide the highest quality, most resilient broadband service. They are the backbone of all modern broadband networks, including those configured as hybrid fiber-coaxial (HFC) – the most prevalent network typology in the state today, fiber-to-the-premise (FTTP), and next generation mobile networks, including 5G. Federal funding guidelines from NTIA and the Treasury Department express a strong preference for fiber network deployment, including FTTP, which enables symmetrical speeds – service that is equally high quality for content production and consumption – as opposed to HFC networks, which are optimized for significantly higher download speeds than upload speeds, and therefore may not meet all data-intensive resident and business needs. Fiber infrastructure is also the component of a broadband network with the longest useful life beyond several decades, making it especially suitable for public investment and ownership. A robust fiber infrastructure is elementary to make the State's broadband network future-proof, sustainable and resilient, against potential security and environmental stressors.

As directed by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the guidance for BEAD fund deployment from NTIA, the first priority for the State will be infrastructure expansion to ensure universal availability of service – that no one is “unserved,” as defined by service of at least 25/3 Mbps to their home or business. The second priority will be infrastructure deployment to “underserved” areas – neighborhoods and buildings that do not have reliable access to service of at least 100/20 Mbps.⁴ Once all Rhode Islanders have that baseline level of service, the State can use federal funds to incentivize new high-quality infrastructure deployments in places that private providers have little incentive to serve without such grants – for example, affordable housing, small businesses and entrepreneurs, and “Community Anchor Institutions” that do not currently have high-quality service. While following this guidance, the State will prioritize deployments that have the ability to support multiple constituents, including those “Covered Populations” identified in the

Digital Equity Act, and to serve multiple use cases across the State’s economic development, education, healthcare, and other civic goals.

2. ELIMINATE COST AS A BARRIER.

The State will work to ensure that no business or household remains unconnected from high quality broadband service due to cost. While widespread adoption of the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) will be a priority for achieving this goal in the short-term, the program is currently designed as only a short-term benefit, and it may not serve all Rhode Islanders in need of lower cost service. Furthermore, the federal guidance for BEAD and Capital Projects Fund calls for recipients of infrastructure grant funds from the State to commit to more affordable levels of service as a condition of the grant. Other means of increasing affordability may include fostering greater consumer choice in the state to facilitate more affordable choices through a more competitive ISP marketplace, supporting locally developed networks specifically designed to serve underconnected communities, or providing further subsidies to consumer who may not be eligible to the ACP or other federal subsidies. By the time the last of the federal funds are deployed this decade, no Rhode Islander should report that they do not subscribe to broadband service because it is too expensive.

3. FOSTER AN INCLUSIVE DIGITAL ADVANCEMENT ECOSYSTEM.

The State’s digital advancement ecosystem – including the organizations and programs that ensure universal access to internet-connected devices, tech support, digital literacy training, and more advanced digital skill-building – must serve the State’s economic development, education, healthcare, and other civic goals. Lack of connectivity, devices, or skills must not be an impediment to any Rhode Islander’s full participation in 21st century society. This is not a one-time goal, but rather an ongoing process that requires consistent and continual measurement and reassessment. As technology and data-needs change, we will refine programs to meet the needs of the State’s businesses, institutions, and residents. Therefore, while the State will ensure that funding for digital equity and economic development are directed towards

⁴For deployments for which Capital Projects Fund may be used as matching funds, minimum speed requirements will be 100 Mbps symmetrical.

relevant and appropriate programs, this funding will act as a catalyst to accelerate the development of a thriving and self-sustaining digital advancement ecosystem in Rhode Island.

Through ConnectRI, and with input from the newly formed Broadband Advisory Council, the State will develop specific metrics to track performance against each of these high-level goals, and those metrics may inform priorities for the use of funds. As the RI Commerce Office of Broadband and Digital Equity works to achieve those goals, it will do so with an eye towards the following principles that will guide the planning effort for ConnectRI:

— **CULTIVATE STRONG IMPLEMENTATION PARTNERSHIPS**

While the State will administer federal funds and be responsible for overseeing their deployment and effective use, it will seek to do so largely through grants and awards to internet service providers and infrastructure companies (i.e., public-private partnerships), local governments, civic institutions, and nonprofits who are well-positioned to deliver in the communities they serve, including by facilitating local and regional partnerships among these prospective “delivery partners” and with existing fiber owners. The State will establish clear performance parameters, affordability and service guarantees, and guidelines around meeting federal matching requirements, depending on delivery partner type and need, including to ensure the State has the means to enforce commitments that its partners make in return for receiving State investment.

— **MEET COMMUNITIES WHERE THEY ARE**

Local governments, Rhode Island institutions, and regional consortia understand the needs of their residents, businesses, and institutions best, and some have begun to evaluate or develop their own broadband or digital equity programs for the populations they serve; the State will seek to resource the organizations that can demonstrate clear connections to the communities they seek to serve, have the capacity to scale or deepen their work, and can meet multiple State goals. This work will include both funding and technical assistance partnerships that facilitate effective program delivery and standards for quality statewide. The State also recognizes that some communities will seek solutions directly from the State, and ConnectRI will provide for the State to do so, where appropriate.

— **ENABLE PARTICIPATORY PLANNING**

Planning to close the digital divide requires participation from everyone affected by it, from those households and businesses that are unconnected or underconnected today, to numerous State and local agencies, to the State’s ecosystem of delivery partners; all should be consulted in the development of ConnectRI. From statewide surveys to in-depth focus groups, and a commitment to provide regular updates on the planning and delivery process, the Office of Broadband and Digital Equity will work to ensure that any Rhode Islander who wants to inform the State’s programs has the opportunity to do so.

— **PACE AND PRIORITIZE ACTIONS FOR IMPACT**

Broadband and digital equity is complex. Various types of infrastructure investments, public services, and policy or regulatory changes may help or hinder the State’s goals. Rather than seek to advance a long list of new programs, ConnectRI will focus first on those initiatives that can have the largest impact towards the State’s broadband and digital equity goals and can leverage funds from both public and private sources, while also setting in place the systems that can facilitate continuous improvement over time.

— **BUILD AND MAINTAIN RELIABLE DATA SYSTEMS FOR DECISION MAKING**

Building and maintaining the data systems to ensure the State has a deep understanding of the digital divide in Rhode Island and the means to track the deployment and impact of its investments will be essential to the success of ConnectRI. This capacity will enable the State to evaluate deployments based on actual speeds to end-users, monitor progress towards closing the digital divide, and to continuously evolve its broadband and digital equity initiatives with its delivery partners.

Upholding these principles and achieving the goals set out in this Strategic Plan will be the responsibility of RI Commerce’s new Office of Broadband and Digital Equity, responsible for developing and delivering the Rhode Island Broadband Development Program that was created by the State’s FY2023 budget, with its Director serving as chair of the Broadband Advisory Council, also established in the State Budget.

TOWARDS CONNECTRI

Federal funding for the State's Five-Year Action Plan for universal broadband availability and Statewide Digital Equity Plan – together, the ConnectRI plan – include specific requirements for the State to determine how it will ensure all Rhode Islanders can connect to broadband service and address barriers to digital equity. Over the next year, as the Office of Broadband and Digital Equity works with the Broadband Advisory Council and all Rhode Island stakeholders to develop this Strategic Plan into ConnectRI, it will focus on four Work Streams:

1. BROADBAND AND DIGITAL EQUITY DATA SYSTEMS

This work will include evaluating new service availability data that the FCC is currently developing through its Broadband Data Collection program and ensuring that that data matches the experience of Rhode Island residents and businesses. Secondly, a statewide Digital Equity Survey will help identify barriers to digital equity that Rhode Islanders experience – including the more than 750,000 Rhode Islanders who are in Covered Populations of the Digital Equity Act, namely households with incomes at or below 150% of the federal poverty line, individuals aged 60 or older, members of racial and ethnic minorities or rural communities, as well as veterans and individuals who are incarcerated or have a disability or language barrier. A third initial data collection effort will be to catalog physical assets that may facilitate more cost-effective broadband infrastructure deployments, including the presence of open access fiber infrastructure and other real estate assets that can host broadband infrastructure and equipment. These three initial data collection and evaluation efforts may inform priorities for investment across the state and can serve as the baseline against which the State will measure progress towards its goals, but they must be complemented by the development of reporting systems for the State's delivery partners to continuously evaluate the impact of the State's investments and to ensure appropriate oversight and compliance with funding requirements.

2. BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT PROGRAM

The largest portion of the funds that the State will receive from the federal government will be used to improve

the extent and quality of broadband infrastructure in Rhode Island. The first priority for these funds will be to ensure that no household or business remains unserved. The State will work to maximize the private sector or municipal funding match for these investments – BEAD requires a funding match of at least 25% – while also seeking to embed affordable service guarantees into these investments. The State expects to have the majority of its BEAD allocation and all of its Capital Projects Fund allocation for broadband infrastructure left to connect unserved households and then prioritize underconnected households and businesses – and any new infrastructure delivered with funding from the Capital Projects Fund will be capable of delivering at least 100/100Mbps, and the State will work to ensure that it is scalable to multi-gigabit symmetrical speed over time.

A statewide Broadband Infrastructure Investment Program will be open to ISPs, local governments or regional consortia, or public-private partnerships. BEAD requires that prospective delivery partners secure at least a 25% funding match for their projects, which will be evaluated according to eligibility criteria from federal guidelines as well as the project's ability to achieve the State's goals, but the State may also make its Capital Project Fund allocation available as this local match, if necessary. ConnectRI will develop planning processes and evaluation criteria targeting the goals and informed by the principles established in this Strategic Plan. ConnectRI will focus on connecting residents and businesses who are more difficult to serve through market-based solutions alone. This includes populations living in affordable housing, as well as underconnected small businesses and community anchor institutions.

3. DIGITAL ADVANCEMENT GRANT PROGRAM

The State plans to use portions of its Digital Equity Capacity Grant, and potentially portions of its BEAD allocation, Capital Project Fund allocation, and other digital inclusion and advancement funding sources from the federal government for a statewide Digital Advancement Grant Program. These grants will be designed to address barriers to digital equity throughout the state and may be used to help scale existing

programs, create new programs, or support the development of community facilities that help to achieve the State's broadband and digital equity goals. While the Digital Advancement Grant Program will be designed to ensure the provision of digital inclusion services to populations in need throughout the state, it may also be used to ensure that covered populations not only have access to the basics – affordable broadband service, devices, digital literacy and tech support – but that they can also participate in more advanced digital skill-building programs that can promote equitable participation in Rhode Island's growing advanced technology industries such as blue economy and biosciences that need more digitally-skilled workers. This program will focus on the goal of fostering an inclusive digital advancement ecosystem, in both the near- and long-term: prospective grantees will be asked to demonstrate how their programs can be self-sustaining after one-time sources of federal funds are depleted.

4. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR DELIVERY PARTNERS

Realizing the full potential of the Broadband Infrastructure Deployment Program and the Digital Advancement Grant Program will require a parallel effort to ensure that delivery partners have the capacity necessary to deliver and the toolkits and resource guides that can help ensure consistently exceptional quality of delivery in every community across the state. Types of technical assistance that local governments and other delivery partners may seek from the Office of Broadband and Digital Equity may include, for example: tools for mapping service quality, infrastructure, and pricing; funding or personnel to understand barriers to digital equity or advancement among households and businesses; understanding how locally-owned infrastructure and

facilities may be used for broadband infrastructure deployments; best practices for improving permitting to facilitate broadband infrastructure; models and templates for entering into public-private partnerships; content or partnerships for device access, tech support, digital literacy, and skill-building; or access to other resources and best practices from across the state, around the nation, or across the globe. As part of the ConnectRI planning process, the Office of Broadband and Digital Equity will determine which of these technical assistance efforts the State may provide directly to Rhode Island communities, and which the State may provide funding for locally based delivery partners to provide. Unlike the Broadband Infrastructure Investment Program and the Digital Advancement Grant Program, this Technical Assistance Program may begin in early 2023 to help locally based organizations determine how they may best serve as delivery partners for broadband and digital equity to the State.

While RI Commerce's Office of Broadband and Digital Equity will be charged with leading these four Work Streams, it will do so with the advice of the State's newly legislated Broadband Advisory Council. This Strategic Plan calls for strong collaboration with numerous delivery partners across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors throughout the state. The focus will be on deploying federal funds effectively, including to catalyze a stronger digital advancement ecosystem throughout Rhode Island.

The Office of Broadband and Digital Equity also will create a new Working Group comprised of representatives statewide agencies. Members of the Working Group may include RI GIS, RI DOT, RI Housing, RIDE, RIDLT, RIOPC, and others. The task of this Working Group will be to facilitate the effective deployment of broadband and digital equity funds.

THE ROAD AHEAD

As of July 2022, Rhode Island has approved the Broadband Development Program in its FY2023 budget. The State has submitted its Letter of Intent to participate in NTIA's BEAD program and its application for the State Digital Equity Planning Grant. This work has been informed by numerous conversations with local and regional stakeholders, who have begun developing local initiatives or participated in the State's roundtable conversations. With the release of this Strategic Plan, the State invites comments from the public and from potential broadband and digital equity delivery partners as it works to advance the development of the State's comprehensive ConnectRI plan. In the months and years to come, Rhode Islanders can look forward to the following milestones for the deployment of federal funds:

— AUGUST 2022

RI Commerce will submit its application for \$5 million in planning funds from the NTIA's BEAD Planning Grant program.

— SEPTEMBER 2022

The State will submit its application to the Department of the Treasury's Capital Projects Fund.

— FALL 2022

The State expects to receive its \$5.5 million in planning funds for BEAD and DEA and will launch its statewide participatory planning program for the development of ConnectRI.

— WINTER-SPRING 2023

The Office of Broadband and Digital Equity launches its data collection efforts and Technical Assistance Program, while leading the planning process for ConnectRI.

— SUMMER-FALL 2023

The State will release ConnectRI and submit to NTIA as the required planning document for the BEAD and SDEP programs.⁵ The State may also submit its "Initial Proposal" for deployment of 20% of the State's BEAD allocation within this time. This Initial Proposal may also be submitted later in 2023, depending on the federal government's timeline.

— WINTER 2024

The State expects to launch its Broadband Infrastructure Investment Program and Digital Advancement Grant Program, contingent on securing the federal funds from its Initial Proposal for BEAD and from its Digital Equity Capacity Grant.

— WINTER-SUMMER 2024

The State's delivery partners submit proposals to the Broadband Infrastructure Investment Program and Digital Advancement Grant Program. They may also apply directly to the NTIA's Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program, which is expected to launch within one month of the Capacity Grant award to the State.

— LATE 2024 – EARLY 2025

The State submits its "Final Proposal" for the use of BEAD funds and uses those funds to scale its broadband and digital equity programs.

— 2025 – 2027

The State continues to work with its delivery partners to deliver ConnectRI, continuously evaluating the state of broadband and digital equity via improved data systems, and optimizing program components accordingly.

— 2028 AND BEYOND

Rhode Island has achieved its broadband and digital equity goals, and delivery partners continue to improve service for all Rhode Islanders, as catalyzed by ConnectRI.

This timeline may be amended to include other sources of funds or compliance with federal mandates. RI Commerce and its Office of Broadband and Digital Equity invite all Rhode Islanders to comment on this Strategic Plan by emailing broadband@commerceri.com or submitting a comment form at commerceri.com/broadband/strategic-plan.

⁵The State will submit ConnectRI to NTIA within 270 days of receipt of its BEAD planning funds and 365 days of its DEA planning funds. The Initial Proposal is due within 180 days of release of the FCC's new broadband data maps and notice of funding amounts.