

RCW 43.155.160 Broadband service expansion grant and loan program—Emergency public works broadband projects. (1) The board, in collaboration with the office, shall establish a competitive grant and loan program to award funding to eligible applicants in order to promote the expansion of access to broadband service in unserved areas of the state.

(2) (a) Grants and loans may be awarded under this section to assist in funding acquisition, installation, and construction of middle mile and last mile infrastructure that supports broadband services and to assist in funding strategic planning for deploying broadband service in unserved areas.

(b) The board may choose to fund all or part of an application for funding, provided that the application meets the requirements of subsection (11) of this section.

(3) Eligible applicants for grants and loans awarded under this section include:

- (a) Local governments;
- (b) Tribes;
- (c) Nonprofit organizations;
- (d) Cooperative associations;
- (e) Multiparty entities comprised of public entity members;
- (f) Limited liability corporations organized for the purpose of expanding broadband access; and
- (g) Incorporated businesses or partnerships.

(4) (a) The board shall develop administrative procedures governing the preapplication and award process. The board shall act as fiscal agent for the program and is responsible for receiving and reviewing applications and awarding funds under this section.

(b) At least sixty days prior to the first day preapplications may be submitted each fiscal year, the board must publish on its website the specific criteria and any quantitative weighting scheme or scoring system that the board will use to evaluate or rank applications and award funding.

(c) The board may maintain separate accounting in the statewide broadband account created in RCW 43.155.165 as the board deems necessary to carry out the purposes of this section.

(d) The board must provide a method for the allocation of loans, grants, provision of technical assistance, and interest rates under this section.

(5) An applicant for a grant or loan under this section must provide the following information on the preapplication:

- (a) The location and description of the project;
- (b) Evidence regarding the unserved nature of the community in which the project is to be located;
- (c) Evidence that proposed infrastructure will be capable of scaling to greater download and upload speeds;
- (d) The number of households passed that will gain access to broadband service as a result of the project or whose broadband service will be upgraded as a result of the project;
- (e) Evidence that before submission of the application, the applicant contacted, in writing, all entities providing broadband service near the proposed project area to ask each broadband service provider's plan to upgrade broadband service in the project area to speeds that meet or exceed the state's definition for broadband service as defined in RCW 43.330.530, within the time frame specified in the proposed grant or loan activities;

- (f) If applicable, the broadband service providers' written responses to the inquiry made under (e) of this subsection;
 - (g) The proposed geographic broadband service area and the proposed broadband speeds in the form and manner prescribed by the board;
 - (h) Evidence of community support for the project; and
 - (i) Any additional information requested by the board.
- (6) An applicant for a grant or loan under this section must provide the following information on the application:
- (a) The final location and description of the project;
 - (b) Evidence that the proposed infrastructure will be capable of scaling to greater download and upload speeds;
 - (c) The number of households passed that will gain access to broadband service as a result of the project or whose broadband service will be upgraded as a result of the project;
 - (d) The estimated cost of retail services to end users facilitated by a project;
 - (e) The proposed actual download and upload speeds experienced by end users;
 - (f) Evidence of significant community institutions that will benefit from the proposed project;
 - (g) Anticipated economic, educational, health care, or public safety benefits created by the project;
 - (h) If available, a description of the applicant's user adoption assistance program and efforts to promote the use of newly available broadband services created by the project;
 - (i) The estimated total cost of the project;
 - (j) Other sources of funding for the project that will supplement any grant or loan award;
 - (k) A demonstration of the project's long-term sustainability, including the applicant's financial soundness, organizational capacity, and technical expertise;
 - (l) A strategic plan to maintain long-term operation of the infrastructure;
 - (m) If applicable, documentation describing the outcome of the broadband service providers' written responses to the inquiry made prior to or during the preapplication phase; and
 - (n) Any additional information requested by the board.
- (7) (a) The board shall publish on its website for at least 30 days the proposed geographic broadband service area and the proposed broadband speeds for each proposed broadband project submitted in the preapplication period.
- (b) The board shall, within three business days following the close of the preapplication cycle, publish on its website preapplications as described in subsection (5) of this section.
 - (c) The board shall set an objection period of at least 30 days.
- (8) (a) Any existing broadband service provider near the proposed project area may submit in writing to the board an objection to a proposed broadband project. An objection must contain information demonstrating that:
- (i) The project would result in overbuild, meaning that the objecting provider currently provides, or has begun construction to provide, broadband service to end users in the proposed project area at speeds equal to or greater than the speeds contained in the definition of broadband in *RCW 43.330.530(2); or
 - (ii) The objecting provider commits to complete construction of broadband infrastructure and provide broadband service to end users in

the proposed project area at speeds equal to or greater than the speeds contained in the definition of broadband in *RCW 43.330.530(2), no later than twenty-four months after the date awards are made under this section for the grant and loan cycle under which the preapplication was submitted.

(b) Objections submitted to the board under this subsection must be certified by affidavit.

(c) The board may evaluate the information submitted under this section by the objecting provider and must consider it in making a determination on the proposed broadband project objected to. The board may request clarification or additional information. The board may choose to not fund a project if the board determines that the objecting provider's commitment to provide broadband service that meets the requirements of (a) of this subsection in the proposed project area is credible. In assessing the commitment, the board may consider whether the objecting provider has or will provide a bond, letter of credit, or other indicia of financial commitment guaranteeing the project's completion.

(d) If the board denies funding to an applicant as a result of a broadband service provider's objection made under this section, and the broadband service provider does not fulfill its commitment to provide broadband service in the project area, then for the following two grant and loan cycles, the board is prohibited from denying funding to an applicant on the basis of a challenge by the same broadband service provider, unless the board determines that the broadband service provider's failure to fulfill the provider's commitment was the result of factors beyond the broadband service provider's control. The board is not prohibited from denying funding to an applicant for reasons other than an objection by the same broadband service provider.

(e) An applicant or broadband service provider that objected to the application may request a debriefing conference regarding the board's decision on the application. Requests for debriefing must be coordinated by the office and must be submitted in writing in accordance with procedures specified by the office.

(f) Confidential business and financial information submitted by an objecting provider under this subsection is exempt from disclosure under chapter 42.56 RCW.

(9) (a) In evaluating applications and awarding funds, the board shall give priority to applications that are constructed in areas identified as unserved.

(b) In evaluating applications and awarding funds, the board may give priority to applications that:

(i) Provide assistance to public-private partnerships deploying broadband infrastructure from areas currently served with broadband service to areas currently lacking access to broadband services;

(ii) Demonstrate project readiness to proceed;

(iii) Construct infrastructure that is open access, meaning that during the useful life of the infrastructure, service providers may use network services and facilities at rates, terms, and conditions that are not discriminatory or preferential between providers, and employing accountable interconnection arrangements published and available publicly;

(iv) Are submitted by tribal governments whose reservations are in rural and remote areas where reliable and efficient broadband services are unavailable to many or most residents;

(v) Bring broadband service to tribal lands, particularly to rural and remote tribal lands or areas servicing rural and remote tribal entities;

(vi) Are submitted by tribal governments in rural and remote areas that have spent significant amounts of tribal funds to address the problem but cannot provide necessary broadband services without either additional state support, additional federal support, or both;

(vii) Serve economically distressed areas of the state as the term "distressed area" is defined in RCW 43.168.020;

(viii) Offer new or substantially upgraded broadband service to important community anchor institutions including, but not limited to, libraries, educational institutions, public safety facilities, and health care facilities;

(ix) Facilitate the use of telemedicine and electronic health records, especially in deliverance of behavioral health services and services to veterans;

(x) Provide technical support and train residents, businesses, and institutions in the community served by the project to utilize broadband service;

(xi) Include a component to actively promote the adoption of newly available broadband services in the community;

(xii) Provide evidence of strong support for the project from citizens, government, businesses, and community institutions;

(xiii) Provide access to broadband service to a greater number of unserved households and businesses, including farms;

(xiv) Utilize equipment and technology demonstrating greater longevity of service;

(xv) Seek the lowest amount of state investment per new location served and leverage greater amounts of funding for the project from other private and public sources;

(xvi) Include evidence of a customer service plan;

(xvii) Consider leveraging existing broadband infrastructure and other unique solutions;

(xviii) Benefit public safety and fire preparedness; or

(xix) Demonstrate other priorities as the board, in collaboration with the office, may prescribe by rule.

(c) The board shall endeavor to award funds under this section to qualified applicants in all regions of the state.

(d) The board shall consider affordability and quality of service to end users in making a determination on any application.

(e) The board, in collaboration with the office, may develop additional rules for eligibility, project preapplications, project applications, the associated objection process, and funding priority, as provided under this subsection and subsections (3), (5), (6), (7), and (8) of this section.

(f) The board, in collaboration with the office, may adopt rules for a voluntary nonbinding mediation between incumbent providers and applicants to the grant and loan program created in this section.

(10) To ensure a grant or loan to a private entity under this section primarily serves the public interest and benefits the public, any such grant or loan must be conditioned on a guarantee that the asset or infrastructure to be developed will be maintained for public use for a period of at least fifteen years.

(11)(a) No funds awarded under this section may fund more than fifty percent of the total cost of the project, except as provided in (b) of this subsection.

(b) The board may choose to fund up to ninety percent of the total cost of a project in financially distressed areas as the term "distressed area" is defined in RCW 43.168.020, and in areas identified as Indian country as the term "Indian country" is defined in WAC 458-20-192.

(c) Funds awarded to a single project under this section must not exceed two million dollars, except that the board may choose to fund projects qualifying for the exception in (b) of this subsection up to, but not to exceed, five million dollars.

(12) The board shall have such rights of recovery in the event of default in payment or other breach of financing agreement as may be provided in the agreement or otherwise by law.

(13) The community economic revitalization board shall facilitate the timely transmission of information and documents from its broadband program to the board in order to effectuate an orderly transition.

(14)(a) Subject to rules promulgated by the board, the board may make low-interest or interest-free loans or grants to eligible applicants for emergency public works broadband projects. While developing rules, the board shall consider prioritizing broadband infrastructure projects that replace existing infrastructure impacted by an emergency, as described in (b) of this subsection.

(b) Emergency public works broadband projects include construction, repair, reconstruction, replacement, rehabilitation, or improvement to critical broadband infrastructure that has been made necessary by a natural disaster or damaged by unforeseen events. To ensure limited resources are provided as efficiently as possible, the board shall grant priority to emergency public works projects that replace existing infrastructure of the provider whose facilities were damaged by the unforeseen event and shall not provide funds to a new provider to overbuild the existing provider. The loans or grants may be used to help fund all or part of an emergency public works broadband infrastructure project less any reimbursement from any of the following sources: (i) Federal disaster or emergency funds, including funds from the federal emergency management agency; (ii) state disaster or emergency funds; (iii) insurance settlements; and (iv) litigation.

(c) Eligible applicants for grants and loans awarded under this subsection are the same as those described in subsection (3) of this section.

(15) The definitions in RCW 43.330.530 apply throughout this section unless the context clearly requires otherwise.

(16) For purposes of this section, a "proposed broadband project" means a project that has been submitted as a preapplication to the public works board. [2022 c 201 § 1; 2021 c 332 § 7040; 2019 c 365 § 7.]

***Reviser's note:** RCW 43.330.530 was alphabetized pursuant to RCW 1.08.015(2)(k), changing subsection (2) to subsection (4), effective July 1, 2023.

Effective date—2021 c 332: See note following RCW 43.19.501.

Findings—2019 c 365: See note following RCW 43.330.532.