



# Georgetown County Economic Development

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Partnership helps bring broadband to rural Georgetown County**

GEORGETOWN COUNTY, S.C. – Georgetown County Economic Development has been working with HTC to bring broadband services to the county’s most rural areas – an action that will provide a powerful movement forward for rural residents and workers.

Broadband is high-speed internet that is used in most of our daily activities. Whether it’s surfing the internet for clothing or trying to pull up lesson plans from schools, broadband has shaped the way we view life today. Areas that don’t have broadband are at a severe disadvantage in many respects. This can cause vast disparities for different parts of the world, and even between communities within the same county.

“Without access to broadband, entire communities are increasingly left behind in today’s information-driven economy,” Said Sonny Perdue, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. “By connecting our communities, we are reconnecting Americans with one another and helping to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to benefit from the economy.”

In South Carolina, at all levels of government, there is recognition of how important broadband is for residents, and the potential for growth it presents across the state.

“Broadband connectivity is a powerful catalyst for economic and social advancement. It is no longer a luxury—it is a necessity, critical to ensuring a level playing field for those in rural areas,” said Gov. Henry McMaster. “Emergency response, healthcare access, education—all rely increasingly on internet access.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced in February that it has invested \$9.1 million in broadband for rural communities in the state of South Carolina.

For Georgetown County, this can be a giant leap for access to vital parts of everyday life. Residents have voiced that without internet, they have limited choices when it comes to running a business or working from home. This is a proven problem, especially with statewide restrictions on business operations and travel in place due to COVID-19. Many rural residents

have typically relied on libraries or their office spaces for high-speed internet, but now many such facilities are closed.

“I can only use the internet to run my credit card machine,” said Ravi Vijay, the owner of Plantersville General Store in the Plantersville community. “If I wanted to use the internet to attach it to a phone line, I would have to disconnect my credit card machine to have it move at a certain pace.”

Another resident who resides in the Plantersville community reported having to turn their router on and off multiple times throughout the day to keep a connection. “It will work for a few minutes, but it doesn’t stay for long and only one person in my home can use it at a time,” said Georgetown County Council Member Louis Morant.

Experiences during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have shown more than ever that reliable broadband is essential for our rural communities. With schools going fully online for the remainder of the year, many students and teachers are left behind because of the lack of having reliable internet service or having internet service at all. This has highlighted how internet service has transitioned over the years from luxury to necessity, and is now considered nearly as vital as water, electricity and telephone services.

“As our society moves forward, more things are becoming remote and are providing an opportunity for those who can permanently work from home,” said Brian Tucker, Georgetown County’s director of economic development. “This cannot happen in rural areas without the installation of reliable broadband.”

Bringing opportunities to rural parts of the county has been a focus of Georgetown County Economic Development for some years now. Thankfully, with government funding, HTC has been able to run fiber to schools in the county, with a focus on enabling residents to tap in and have reliable internet in their homes. This will help residents have a better understanding of broadband and how it can help with everyday activities. Communities that have not had reliable access to internet from their homes would be able to work from home in such times as these, and also have better cellphone service to connect with loved ones and business contacts wherever they are.

Georgetown County Economic Development hopes increasing opportunities will also increase the number of young people who choose to remain in the county and join the workforce after they finish school – and perhaps lure back some who have already moved away.

“As we know today, our youth thrive best in areas where wireless service is available, as well as high speed internet,” Tucker said. “This improvement to broadband may also lead to more tech companies potentially investing in the area. Broadband has been one of the forces behind tech companies investing in rural areas in other parts of the world, transforming those areas into thriving communities.”

Charleston and Berkeley counties have already started connecting homes to high speed internet. Debbie Turbeville, the South Carolina director for the USDA’s Rural Development division, pointed out that broadband helps children better compete academically with students in areas where high-speed internet is more accessible. She also pointed out how it will attract businesses and help hospitals, as well as colleges.

There are five USDA programs in place for rural areas:

- The ReConnect program provides loans, grants, and a combination of the two. These are given to telecommunications service providers, municipalities, and cooperatives to facilitate broadband deployment in areas that have little to no service.
- The Community Connect program provides the grants that deliver broadband to underprivileged areas. These grants fund broadband infrastructures and connections at local community centers.
- The Rural Broadband Program provides loans to construct, obtain, or improve facilities and equipment. This was reauthorized by the 2018 Farm Bill, or the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 under the Rural Development section.
- Distance Learning and Telemedicine are two programs combined into one that help rural communities obtain the technology, training, and equipment to connect with their local doctors and educators for services.

These programs will provide workshops to communities and help residents understand how to use these services.

“We are definitely looking forward to greater things with rural broadband in Georgetown County,” Tucker said. “Broadband access would provide a great impact to the county in the area of jobs/business acquisitions, schools, medical facilities and other community related functions. It’s a must for rural areas.”

If you would like to know how to get HTC coverage, please contact Brian Tucker or Maya Morant at (843) 655-2312 or (843) 461-6871.

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