Executive Summary

The Florida Rural Broadband Alliance, LLC (FRBA) is applying for project funding under the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) as part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The FRBA is a regional collaboration of local and tribal governments, community activists and economic development agencies from rural and economically disadvantaged communities located throughout 15 counties within the State's Northwest Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern (NWRACEC) and the South Central Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern (SCRACEC). The FRBA project will build a new Middle Mile broadband infrastructure, which will link together providers of vital public sector commercial services with private sector non-profit entities for the first time in these two struggling regions of the State. Support for this new middle mile infrastructure is unanimous across government, incumbents and new entrants alike. Attached to this application are 127 letters of support from elected officials, private businesses, last mile providers and community anchor institutions. The FRBA project has been initiated through the cooperation of public and private entities, as a true public-private partnership to provide much needed assistance to these communities; however, the project cannot be constructed without federal assistance. The FRBA service area is composed of two of the three Rural Areas of Critical Economic Concern (RACECs) established by the Governor of the State of Florida. The South Central RACEC is comprised of DeSoto, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, Highlands and Okeechobee Counties as well as the unincorporated area of Immokalee in Collier County and tribal lands of the Seminole Tribe of Florida (collectively the 'SCRACEC'). The Northwest RACEC includes Calhoun, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty and Washington Counties. A 2008 study conducted by the Florida House of Representatives determined that expanded access to broadband facilities was one of the critical infrastructure needs of Florida's rural communities. On June 29, 2009, Florida Governor Charlie Crist signed into law Chapter 2009-226, Laws of Florida, providing that broadband internet service is critical to the rural communities of the State, including the 3 RACECs. In the State's review of Round 1 BTOP applications, the applications submitted for all 3 of the RACECs were granted the Governor’s highest priority for broadband deployment. These counties are endeavoring daily to provide essential public services within their communities. Despite the incredible need for broadband infrastructure in these communities, these counties simply do not have the financial resources to invest in the deployment of broadband in these tough economic times. These communities are struggling to overcome the effects of persistent poverty, under education, limited access to medical care and above average unemployment. The FRBA project will address the very compelling problem of the lack of availability of broadband infrastructure throughout these disadvantaged rural counties in Florida. While meeting all 5 of the statutory goals of the BTOP Program and all 7 of the Comprehensive...
Community Infrastructure Priorities identified in the NOFA, the FRBA project will for the first time provide ubiquitous Middle Mile Broadband Internet access to residents, private entities, public institutions and the business community in unserved, underserved and remote areas of the NWRACEC and the SCRACEC regions. At this time, only 39% of the FRBA region has broadband service. The FRBA project will be able to deliver up to 1,000 times (1Gbps) the Federal definition of Broadband to the services areas. The FRBA has worked cooperatively with last mile providers throughout the development of the project. The commitments from Main Street Broadband for the NWRACEC and Rapid Systems, Inc. for the SCRACEC to provide 100% last mile coverage within these regions indicates that the FRBA project can be a solution to the problem of limited broadband availability for all of the residents and businesses in the RACEC’s. According to Main Street Broadband, the availability of FRBA’s middle mile network in the NWRACEC would enable them to roll out last mile services 50 to 75% faster. The FRBA was organized as a limited liability company on March 16, 2010 by two non-profit economic development corporations representing the 2 RACEC regions. In order to promote the involvement of the local governments within the 2 regions, the non-profit agencies structured the Operating Agreement of the FRBA to include the creation of a Board of Governors. The Board of Governors will be composed of one representative from each county, a representative from the unincorporated area of Immokalee and one member on behalf of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. The Board of Governors will make all critical decisions relating to the expenditure of grant funds by the FRBA and the deployment of the middle mile infrastructure throughout the two regions. This unique governance structure will allow the local governments to participate in the project. In addition, to the cooperative efforts of the government and non-profit communities, the FRBA project also incorporates partnerships with for-profit entities, for deployment and contract operations of the entity - all of whom have substantial "skin" in the project. The FRBA governance structure is modeled after that employed by the North Florida Broadband Authority which was organized by the 3rd Florida RACEC and was the State's only BTOP awardee in Round 1. In addition, the FRBA network employs the same design and management team assembled for the NFBA project. The NFBA has recently been informed that its project is the most 'shovel ready' of all BTOP Round 1 awardees because the design's utilization of existing towers exempts the project from environmental assessment requirements. In addition, the FRBA project has a fully assembled project team, further escalating the shovel ready nature of the project. The approval of the FRBA's application would ensure the expanded access to broadband infrastructure throughout all 30 of Florida’s rural counties contained within the 3 RACECs. The FRBA network will utilize microwave, fixed wireless architecture and technology. Designed fundamentally to deliver high capacity and cost-effective Middle Mile infrastructure to extend the Internet backbone capacity, the network will provide 600Mbps - 1 Gbps full duplex capacity throughout the large and sparsely populated RACEC’s. Following the successful model of the NFBA, the FRBA will utilize the flexible and quickly deployed microwave links to provide redundant, path-diverse bandwidth to vital anchor institutions, Government agencies and Last Mile providers. Community Colleges, schools, health care facilities, libraries, first responder agencies, will all benefit from the additional capacity as it is made available throughout the more than 11,000 square miles covered by the RACEC service areas. The core networks of 80 microwave links are the most cost-effective and fastest means to deploy this level of bandwidth. At a total cost of roughly $28,000 per link mile for the middle mile backbone, this network allows for flexible deployment, easy modification, rapid scalability, and is by design a route diverse, carrier class network. No other network architecture can
deliver the “bang for the buck” that this one can - and the NTIA apparently agreed in awarding a round 1 BTOP grant for this same design in the other Florida RACEC.