The Washington County Regional Broadband Initiative addresses the problem of insufficient and expensive broadband capacity that is pervasive across Washington County. Unlike the more urbanized areas of the state, Washington County has no dark fiber, and commercial rates are prohibitive for its municipalities and hospitals. Addressing this problem directly, the Washington County Regional Broadband Initiative will provide a user-owned broadband infrastructure that spans the county using the municipal space on the existing pole system. Using a hob/spoke approach, the network will bring fiber-optic cable and wireless capacity that will remove capacity problems and serve our towns and schools with adequate data transmission and telecommunications capacity for years to come. Washington County is the southernmost county in RI. With a population of 129,324 in its 605 square miles, there are 48,898 households and 5,727 businesses. Washington County encompasses nine towns, with eight of them on the mainland and one 12 miles into the Atlantic Ocean. This town, New Shoreham, is also called Block Island, and presents unique problems. Separated from the rest of the state by open ocean, it is often isolated. It is not connected to the national electrical grid and currently relies on frequently interrupted diesel generators. Its winter population (1,010) jumps to 20,000 or more in the summer’s tourist season, taxing its public safety and health care infrastructure. The Washington County Regional Broadband Initiative (WCRBI) will link Block Island to the mainland with a microwave system and lateral fiber on the island connecting its police station, health care clinic, school, library, town hall, and other municipal buildings. On the mainland, Washington County is on the grid, and does have commercial fiber, although frequently not to buildings. The capacity is low, and our two hospitals (see attached letters) cannot provide some remote services because the high quality data, image, and video capacity is simply unaffordable or not available. Public safety officials are also concerned, and letters from towns are attached as information. The WCRPC is currently researching combining multiple dispatch centers'the single largest prohibitive factor is the cost of linking the facilities. The WCRBI will resolve this issue. Our education institutions also'at the K-12 and higher education level, are constrained in their services, and with this infrastructure will be able to do remote classroom, voip, genome and oceanographic data transfers, and more. Overall, the Washington County Regional Broadband Initiative will provide a service that is now impossible or unaffordable. The WCRBI will create a regional backbone encircling our county and linking with the University of Rhode Island's funded (but not yet constructed) links between its Kingston and Narragansett Bay campuses, as well as two campuses of the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI). Public buildings and other facilities (known in the program as 'Anchor Institutions') will be linked with lateral lines to the backbone. The backbone deserves special mention. It will be provided one of two ways. OSHEAN (see letter of support) hopes to build a backbone around
Washington County, and is applying separately for a BTOP grant (# 4422) to do so. OSHEAN will also reach Block Island with an undersea cable that will be laid alongside the proposed Deepwater electrical cable that is currently subject to permit review as part of an offshore wind energy project. Should OSHEAN be funded, this will provide our backbone. Otherwise, our proposal shows a backbone that will be created with funds (cash match) from the University of Rhode Island. URI has been attracting these funds for years because its research and data needs far exceed the current system and it cannot even link its own two Washington County campuses—the main campus at Kingston and the renowned Narragansett Bay Campus. URI's support letter shows the depth of their commitment to this project. Across the county, our towns, schools, and hospitals will benefit from the $10.9 M system that includes 255 miles of fiber-optic and wireless middle mile broadband infrastructure serving the 9 communities in Washington County, RI. This network of 1 to 10 Gbps will serve 187 community anchor institutions, including police and fire departments, rescue services, emergency management facilities, town halls, public school buildings, libraries, community centers, municipal utility departments, public works facilities, the Community College of RI's Westerly and Knight campuses, URI's main Kingston and Narragansett Bay Campuses, and both Westerly and South County Hospitals. It is coordinated with OSHEAN's proposal, but is designed to stand alone if only the Washington County Regional Broadband Initiative is funded. This vital project will also provide much needed economic stimulus and job creation to the unemployed and under-employed population in the State of Rhode Island, which currently suffers from a 12.3% unemployment rate. With it, our institutions will be able to transmit high quality data across town and around the world. It is sized to serve our communities for years to come. The proposed system will pass 5,727 businesses and over 48,000 households. It will be connected to 187 anchor institutions, including 44 schools, 11 libraries, 3 Hospitals/Health Centers, 34 public safety entities, 4 institutions of higher learning, 20 community support organizations, and 71 government facilities. The system will be owned by its member towns and governed by the Washington County Regional Planning Council Board of Directors (one elected town council member from each of the nine Washington County towns) plus the University of Rhode Island. An Information Technology Team (IT Directors from all 17 founding clients) will advise both the governing board and management, which will be provided by WCRPC staff. Outside counsel and an independent CPA firm will provide legal and accounting advice, Washington County Regional Planning Council's bookkeeping staff will keep day to day books, and maintenance will be contracted to URI, which has full fiber-certified technicians and bucket trucks. The WCRBI is projected to create 117 new job-years, according to the Council on Economic Advisors. Of these, 64%, or 75 are direct or indirect jobs, and the project will induce another 42 jobs throughout the economy.