

Kent County Broadband Roadmap 2023

February 21, 2024

Kent County Michigan



Executive Summary

Located in Western Michigan, Kent County is the fourth largest county in the state and home to more than 658,000 residents across a range of rural communities and urban centers.¹ The County is subdivided into 21 Townships, 5 Villages, and 9 Cities, with the City of Grand Rapids (Grand Rapids) serving as the County Seat. With nearly 200,000 residents, Grand Rapids is the largest urban municipality in the region by population, and the second largest city in the State of Michigan behind Detroit.

As one of Michigan's largest counties, the importance of access to fast, reliable, and affordable internet to Kent County's economy cannot be overstated. Nearly 28,000 households² (approximately 72,000 individuals)³ in the County lack access to wired (i.e., fiber, cable, or DSL) broadband subscriptions. While the core drivers behind a lack of broadband subscriptions vary significantly depending on the region of the county, they can be generally attributed to a lack of affordable options in the county's denser urban centers, limited provider choice in populous suburban areas, an overall absence of broadband infrastructure in exurban and rural / remote regions, and extremely slow internet speeds in some areas that do offer some form of service.

***“We conduct business today as if everyone has access to the internet, but they don’t.” –
Community Stakeholder***

Research has shown that access to the internet is a significant economic driver, with repeated academic studies demonstrating every dollar invested in broadband returns roughly \$4 to the local economy, notably in benefits related to economic and workforce development in rural and remote areas.⁴ Analysis of the existing body of research demonstrates that internet connectivity is inextricably linked to regional prosperity⁵, particularly the correlation between higher levels of broadband availability and adoption with economic growth, higher incomes, and decreased unemployment. Broadband also plays a key role in public safety, such as improving communication of critical information in real-time for first responders in an emergency or providing rural law enforcement entities access to digital tools and hardware that enhance investigative and peacekeeping capabilities.⁶ Access to broadband is additionally correlated with positive outcomes for health, education, and other social determinants of health.⁷

Today, the economic, social, and safety benefits of broadband are not accessible to all Americans. This “Digital Divide” - the gap between people with effective access to digital and information technology, and those with very limited or no access at all⁸ – impacts communities across the country, particularly those in remote, rural, low-income, or otherwise marginalized communities. To begin to address its digital divide, Kent County conducted a community survey and current state assessment of its broadband needs to inform the development of this Roadmap.

¹ [2021 Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program \(PEP\)](#)

² [ACS 5-year estimates](#)

³ Number of households multiplied by 2.58, the number of persons per household in Kent County, per [ACS 5-year data](#)

⁴ [Universities of Purdue and Tennessee, Chattanooga](#)

⁵ [Broadband's contribution to economic growth in rural areas: Moving towards a causal relationship](#)

⁶ [Benton Institute, Public Safety and Homeland Security](#)

⁷ [Brookings, Digital prosperity: How broadband can deliver health and equity to all communities](#)

⁸ [Benton Institute](#)

Based on the findings from the data collection and analysis, this Plan outlines objectives and strategies for the County and partners to address those needs (specific objectives and strategies presented below) across Kent County. While all communities can benefit from further investment in broadband, data/geospatial analysis, stakeholder engagement, and community inputs, the analysis conducted thus far has identified the benefits for the County to establish its voice as a facilitator of digital access and inclusion for all residents. Another pressing need facing the County is the sustainment and expansion of existing digital inclusion efforts currently taking place that could benefit from focused support by the County and its partners. Due to state legislation around broadband deployments and the structure of home-rule authorities within the county, infrastructure projects will require close collaboration with local municipalities and internet service providers (ISPs) in order to set their communities up for lasting, dependable connectivity solutions for the future.

A summary of the Plan is included below which details the overall objectives and strategies for the County and its partners to consider as they move towards a more digitally accessible future. Additional details for the graphic may be found in later sections.

Objectives		
1. Formalize County's Role	2. Drive Digital Inclusion and Adoption	3. Encourage Infrastructure Expansion
Strategies		
1.1 Empower a County Broadband Coordinator	2.1 Partner with municipalities, non-profits, and community anchor institutions	3.1 Unify internal County agencies, departments, and offices with existing broadband network roles (One-County)
1.2 Establish formal communication channels for stakeholders and the Kent County Community	2.2 Prioritize sustainment and expansion of device rental programs	3.2 Grow public access points for broadband connectivity
1.3 Engage Cities and Townships directly on their broadband / digital inclusion needs and opportunities	2.3 Pursue opportunities to support and expand digital literacy programs	3.3 Identify opportunities to engage Internet Service Providers (ISPs) on coordinated broadband investments
1.4 Explore closer collaboration with the Michigan High-Speed Internet (MIHI) Office	2.4 Promote the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) through County and County partner channels	3.4 Support municipalities in pursuing City or Township-level broadband expansion initiatives
Measures		
Awareness – Adoption – Availability – Affordability		

Figure 1:

Broadband Roadmap - Objectives and Strategies

Summary of Key Findings

In the following sections, this roadmap provides context and analysis around each of the below key takeaways. Each takeaway identifies key information the County can take into consideration when determining the path forward and bringing connectivity to residents.

Key Takeaways

- Municipal and community stakeholders identified **a desire for greater collaboration with the County** in planning and executing broadband efforts, particularly where parallel municipal and county services (i.e., public safety, schools, libraries) have overlapping needs.

- County leadership has recognized this **gap between historic relations and current needs**, prioritizing the forging of active relationships and a more proactive role in engaging stakeholders.
- As a **convening organization**, the County can leverage its ability to quickly gather stakeholder groups and decision makers on digital access and inclusion priorities.
- **Broadband access and digital inclusion are essential** for Kent County to thrive and remain competitive in education, economic development, talent retention/attraction, employment, and population growth.
- **Kent County must drive collaboration and coordination** by taking a leading role to identify needs, convening stakeholders, and initiating progress toward shared goals.
- **Identifying and allocating sustainable funding sources** is necessary to incentivize ISPs to expand broadband infrastructure, to maintain or enhance digital literacy education, device distribution and rental programs, and more.
- **Public-Private Partnerships** will allow the County to pursue funding opportunities, grow the infrastructure network, expand education, increase accessibility, and boost awareness of efforts.
- A **“One-County” model** that unifies existing internal bodies within Kent County government will enable a more cohesive approach to digital inclusion and broadband deployment throughout the County.
- Overall, the County should look to **leverage existing legislation** to explore unique funding opportunities, ownership models, and deployment priorities through **Public-Private partnerships**.
- The County should partner with ISPs, utility providers, and the State to **streamline all aspects of the broadband deployment permitting process** where possible.
- Closer, **formalized collaboration with the State MIHI Office** will enable the County to more easily navigate the State’s legislative and policy environment and secure critical funding.
- A **collaborative approach to local government partners** will position the County as a trusted partner for supporting local unit-level initiatives, without overstepping its authorities.
- **Individually, datasets do not provide a complete picture of the County’s market structure**. However, taken together these datasets provide reliable insights into the overall nature of need that can then be further explored by the County in future conversations and analyses.
- As existing datasets have identified where there is a lack of broadband coverage and infrastructure, **the County must diligently work to establish conversations with townships, cities, and communities** around the drivers behind this digital divide: availability, affordability, and adoption.
- **Working with ISPs to then identify projects that meet these needs** will facilitate smart broadband investments
- **ISPs require a clear financial incentive** to enter a P3 initiative for expanding infrastructure to areas that may not offer an attractive ROI with private investment alone.
- The County can more effectively position itself as a partner by understanding how **existing government-owned infrastructure can be leveraged to support broadband** deployments.
- **Energy utility infrastructure** forms the backbone of Kent County’s broadband infrastructure.
- **That broadband is available and plentiful does not always indicate affordability** for residents who may be unable to pay for a plan.

- Over 40% of survey respondents without broadband service **report being unable to get high speed internet at their location**; Over 30% of residents of residents without broadband service **cite cost as the greatest barrier** to subscribing to an internet plan.
- **Socioeconomic divides, particularly along income**, underscore how the nature of need can vary for groups even within the same type of need (e.g., lack of access).
- **Awareness of existing programs** whether local digital literacy efforts or federal ACP subsidies are critical to ensuring residents have access to resources that are active and available today.
- **The economic gains generated by broadband are significant** and can drive positive socioeconomic externalities for the County that, in turn, create a positive feedback loop.
- **Positioning is the critical first step** towards addressing the region's digital divide; the County must be perceived as the primary point of contact by Federal, State, and private sector stakeholders, as well as a trusted partner to help communities, cities, and townships tackle their broadband needs.
- **The importance of sustained funding cannot be understated**, and there is value in County investment in its residents by supporting and expanding broadband / digital inclusion initiatives that will benefit the economy and quality of life.