



Cuyahoga County
Office of Innovation and Performance

**Request for Information (RFI)
Partnership for Deployment of Broadband Services in
Cuyahoga County, Ohio**

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RFI Point of Contact & Plan Holder's List Manager

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Introduction

Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation and Performance

The Office of Innovation and Performance works to create a culture of innovation and operational excellence through data-driven decision making, researching and implementing best practices, and focusing on results to improve service delivery for residents of Cuyahoga County. To make County government more efficient and effective Office of Innovation and Performance programs focus on three areas: Performance Management, Culture of Innovation, and Process Improvement. In addition to these programs the Office of Innovation and Performance has supported many digital inclusion efforts in Cuyahoga County, beginning with the commission of the [Connecting Cuyahoga](#) report.

What is a Request for Information (RFI)

As the name suggests, Cuyahoga County uses RFIs to gather information to help decide what steps to take before embarking on formal procurements. RFIs are therefore seldom the final stage, but instead are often used in conjunction with other procurement methods. An RFI is a solicitation sent to a broad base of potential suppliers and service providers for the purpose of conditioning, gathering information, preparing for an RFP (Request for Proposal), developing strategy, or building a database which will be useful in later procurement efforts about:

- The supplier or service provider, including facilities, finances, attitudes, and motivations.
- The state of the market and any anticipated changes.
- Trends and factors driving those changes.
- Alternative pricing strategies.
- Supplier's or provider's competition.
- Breadth and width of product/service offerings, by supplier or service provider.
- Supplier or service provider strategic focus, business, and product or service plans.

The County may use RFIs to include a detailed list of products/services for which pricing is requested. The pricing should be used for comparative purposes for later negotiation, not as the basis of negotiators' buying decisions. Through analysis of RFI responses, strategic options, lower cost alternatives, and cost reduction opportunities may be identified.

Purpose of RFI

Cuyahoga County issues this Request for Information (RFI) to solicit ideas for potential strategies and partnerships to expand affordable, high-speed broadband services to County residents. The County anticipates that this RFI will be a primary means of industry input before it determines its specific implementation plan for how it will achieve its universal broadband goals. The County will consider a wide range of construction, operation, ownership, and financing options associated with public-private agreements, non-exclusive franchises, and other appropriate alternatives in its evaluation of business models to pursue. This includes creative solutions maximizing the efficiency of total investments by all parties while providing the scope of work to meet the needs of its residents.

Cuyahoga County's purposes in the RFI process are as follows:

Request for Information for Partnership for Deployment of Broadband Services in Cuyahoga County, OH

1. Identify qualified vendors interested in engaging with Cuyahoga County to make high-quality internet access available in the County limits either individually, in partnership with other providers, or in partnership with the County.
2. Identify and evaluate innovative, cost-effective, sustainable, resilient business models to high-quality internet access in the County limits. This includes identifying strategic-level conceptual terms and conditions under which selected providers would likely participate in such a project.
3. Learn more about what assets and contributions would facilitate the deployment of the vendor's solution. Vendors should discuss permitting, rights-of-way, property usage, conduit access, fiber connections, electricity requirements, and any other required or beneficial contributions.
4. At the County's option, meet with select vendors for in-depth discussions regarding the vendors' approach, capability, business model, and proposed key terms and conditions. Discussions may be expanded to jointly develop details of potential agreements, non-exclusive franchise, or other business arrangements.

Based on the outcome of the RFI and subsequent discussions with select vendors, the County will determine next steps based on the County's best interest. The County may issue a more detailed Request for Proposal (RFP) relating to this project, cancel, or delay plans for this initiative, or choose another direction that is deemed in the community's best interest. This RFI does not constitute a solicitation of proposals, a commitment to conduct procurement, an offer to contract, or an offer of a prospective contract. No arrangement will be entered into as a direct result of this RFI if a more detailed Request for Proposal is required by law. The Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation and Performance will not be liable for any costs incurred by respondents in the preparation and submission of information in response to this RFI.

Public Access to Information

As a government agency, the County is subject to [Ohio's Sunshine Laws](#). To that end, RFI responses should refrain from divulging proprietary information or trade secrets. In the event the County receives a public records request for information that a business responding to this RFI has marked as proprietary or a trade secret, the County will promptly provide the applicant notice of the request. The applicant may then explain in writing, within a reasonable time, why the information should be withheld. The burden of proving an exception under Ohio's Sunshine laws resides with the applicant.

Background

Cuyahoga County is one of the worst connected communities in the U.S. According the 2019 American Community Survey, 19 percent of households in the County do not have any type of Internet service, including mobile data plans. About 32 percent of households in the County do not have a broadband connection at home, and 63 percent of these households have annual incomes below \$35,000. Additionally, for many County residents with an internet connection, access to reliable broadband is sporadic, and they are forced to settle for inadequate speeds.

The County recognizes that broadband is a critical infrastructure all residents need to thrive. Providing equal and affordable access to broadband is essential to promoting equal opportunity in business,

education, employment, healthcare, and all other aspects of day-to-day life. As part of its strategic plan, the County aims to expand the availability for residents to access affordable broadband services and improve service quality in areas that are already covered.

In August 2020, Cuyahoga County partnered with the Cleveland Foundation and PCs for People to provide internet hotspots and laptops to families with K-12 students enrolled in public or charter schools within the County. While over 3,000 households have gained broadband access, the program has only served a fraction of residents without internet, and it does not meet long-term broadband needs. Thus, the County is seeking for a sustainable solution for reliable, high-speed broadband service to close the digital divide.

Objectives

Project Overview

Cuyahoga County is seeking to identify ready-to-deploy ideas or projects that will provide County residents with an affordable high-speed internet connection. These options may range from new products and pricing, new service options with discounted rates, free Wi-Fi solutions that residents can reach from their homes, or other innovative approaches employing established or emerging technologies. The County is most interested in identifying vendors able to construct, manage, or utilize a robust network that leads to reliably providing cost-competitive access to the scope of work in a timely manner (1–2 years or less).

The County encourages responses to this RFI on an approach or collaboration that could contribute to increased economic opportunity and improved individual wellbeing for all County residents. One of the County's key priorities is to provide all residents with the opportunity to access robust, affordable broadband service. While a lack of internet connectivity can be seen in all areas of the County, the County recognizes there are specific cities and neighborhoods where a lack of an internet connection is concentrated. The goal of this RFI is to identify solutions for all County residents, therefore proposed solutions must address underserved areas and avoid "cherry picking," or building only to the most affluent areas of the County. If possible, the network should also address problems with service and cost in areas that are currently served.

Further, the County is acutely aware that providers advertise as being "served" some areas in which residents and businesses in fact cannot obtain internet service, or are told that service is only available if they individually finance a large-scale fiber build. The County wishes to address this problem by requesting that the vendor clearly identify its proposed services area, provide information about the economic investment necessary needed for any buildout, and share its views on how that economic investment can or should be financed. Low-income residents are particularly vulnerable, and broadband is important to help level the playing field. As the world becomes increasingly connected, broadband access is key to education, job training, and even access to one's own medical records. We expect vendors to be sensitive to this reality, and to be willing to work with the County to develop creative solutions for supporting all members of the community. Proposal of a county-wide solution is possible; however, the County recognizes all models may not work in all areas. Therefore, certain areas could potentially be chosen as a pilot for providers that do not have an existing footprint in the County.

Incumbent providers are strongly encouraged to provide information as to proposed or future deployment in the identified unserved and underserved areas of the County.

Vendor Responsibilities

The County is willing to consider all proposals for partnerships and welcomes vendors' unique approaches to technology and broadband access. The County prefers proposals to include, but are not limited to, the following components:

1. **Network Design and Construction** – The vendor shall design, build, install, own, operate, and manage the network. The network shall have the following features and functionality.
 - a. Capability for 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload speeds to all customers. This is the minimum speed to be consider broadband service. However, the County acknowledges this level of service may not fully serve the needs of residents in an increasing digital world. Therefore, a plan to increase speeds to 100 Mbps download and 10 Mbps upload to all customers in the medium-term, with scalability for greater speeds as needs emerge is also requested
 - b. Delivery of unfettered data offering that does not impose caps or usage limits on one use of data over another (i.e., does not limit streaming); all application providers (data, voice, video, cloud services) will be equally able to provide their services, and the consumer's access to applications will open the marketplace
2. **Customer Service Excellence** – The vendor will offer consumers with an improved customer experience in all aspects, including response times to service issues. The vendor should provide information on their ability to complete marketing and public awareness programs, multilingual access to services, services and adaptive technologies for people with disabilities, and related services and hardware to be provided, including jacks, network boxes and Wi-Fi routers.
3. **Community Partnerships** – The vendor should provide information on potential partnerships with organizations that will assist residents in subscribing to Internet services, making payments for Internet subscriptions, providing access to free and low-cost devices including laptops, PCs, tablets, smartphones and related hardware, as well as providing residents with access to training, education and support services.

Qualifications

Responses are welcome from any vendor with the ability to meet the County's goals. This may include incumbent service providers, competitive providers, nonprofit organizations, public cooperatives, nontraditional providers, and any other interested, capable entities.

RFI Procedures

All interested parties are encouraged to respond in writing to this RFI. Responses should be limited to 25 pages or less. Responses in all types of documents are acceptable, including Word, PowerPoint, PDF, as well as reports provided to other organizations that would address the RFI. The contact person listed below is available for assistance if needed.

If responses include proprietary information, trade secrets, and/or confidentiality concerns, vendors should clearly mark information as such and include it as a separate section of the response if possible.

Questions and Response Submissions

The Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation and Performance welcomes written, or emailed comments and questions related to this RFI by December 18, 2020. Responses must be submitted to the Office of Innovation and Performance's designated point of contact listed below. Responses can be submitted by email or mailed to the address below.

Designated Point of Contact

The Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation official single point of contact for this RFI and the delivery point for all responses and correspondence is as follows:

Catherine Tkachyk
Chief Innovation & Performance Officer
Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation and Performance
2079 E. 9th Street
Cleveland, OH 44115
thelab@cuyahogacounty.us

Written notice will be given if another designee is appointed.

Timeframe

This is the timeframe for the RFI:

- November 30, 2020 – The RFI is sent out
- December 18, 2020 – Last date for questions at 4:30 pm EST
- January 15, 2021 – Last date for submission of response at 4:30 pm EST

Vendor Responses

Cuyahoga County requests the following information—in concise and clear detail—from vendors. If possible, the County asks for responses to follow the exact order below and use the appropriate response headers.

A. Introduction

1. **Cover Letter:** Responses shall include a cover letter in the standard business format. The cover letter must include, but is not limited to, all of the following information:
 - a. Vendor legal name
 - b. Legal status of the organization (i.e., Corporation, Partnership, etc.)
 - c. Number of years the organization has been in business
 - d. Federal Tax ID
 - e. Principal place of business
 - f. Name, phone number, email address, and mailing address of the contact person who has the authority to answer questions regarding the proposal.

- g. Vendor representative authorized to make contractual obligations must sign the cover letter.
2. **Table of Contents:** Identify each required section of your proposal for easy accessibility for all reviewers.

B. Vendor Qualifications

1. Provide a brief description of vendor's qualifications to provide the required services.
2. Identify other broadband networks your firm has designed, built, maintained, or operated; include the levels of broadband speed, availability, and adoption among different categories of end users and unique capabilities or attributes. Discuss partnerships with other service providers, governments, or nonprofit entities you have undertaken. Describe the nature of the projects and your firm's role.
3. Identify customer segments served. Provide a description of customer service capabilities and technical support practices, including service standards.
4. For entities currently providing communications services in or near Cuyahoga County, describe your current service footprint in the County and the region, including a description of the type of infrastructure and services you currently offer and the technology platform(s) used.

C. Preliminary Proposal for Internet Service and Broadband Content

1. Technology

- a. Provide the technological approach you would use for this project. Each description should include the following information:
 - i. Technologies proposed and the limitations of each technology, and if a variety of technologies are contemplated, a discussion of the factors likely to influence the choice of technologies
 - ii. As much detail as possible regarding network design including, but not limited to: network design criteria, network elements, architecture, protocols, system reliability, and availability
 - iii. Network performance characteristics, including the range of offerings, the capacity, contention ratio, and other factors relevant for each proposed solution.
- b. Describe the service options you plan to offer over this network (for example, data only; voice and data; a triple-play of voice, data, and video). What download/upload or symmetrical speeds would you offer and guarantee to end users? How will residential and business offerings differ? What types of service level agreements (for lit services: availability and packet delivery; for dark fiber: repair time) would you be prepared to offer?
- c. Describe what technical and practical solutions you will provide to prioritize unfettered data access.

2. Business Model

- a. Describe the key components of the business model you intend to use for the partnership, including its:
 - i. Business or network ownership structure
 - ii. Service delivery and customer support

- iii. Implementation strategies and roles including branding or co-branding, community engagement, customer education, marketing, and others impacting the project's success.
 - iv. Performance monitoring, data collection, and public reporting
 - b. **Service Area:** Identify and describe the geographic area within which you would anticipate developing a network and providing services.
 - i. If you have existing services in or near Cuyahoga County, how would you expand your current footprint in the County?
 - c. **Financial Plan:** Cuyahoga County recognizes respondents may not have project costs specific to the County or may not have adequate budgetary information to provide detailed responses to this section. However, responses are encouraged to provide summarized estimated ranges of financial metrics most applicable to the proposed business model including:
 - i. Project cost
 - ii. Cost of monthly service (to residential, business, fiber, etc.)
 - iii. Factors impacting monthly costs (as specific as possible)
 - iv. Take rates expected
 - v. Any other offsetting financial contributions and whether those are committed or projected
 - d. **Maintenance:** If you are proposing to perform fiber network maintenance, describe your ability to perform maintenance on an ongoing and as-needed basis. Provide estimates of the operating cost of maintaining the facilities for the type of network you suggest and include your main assumptions. If you are not performing maintenance, who is?
 - e. **Scale:** Identify how many residents can the plan benefit. Describe how likely is it for this benefit to reach additional residents over time.
 - f. **Risks:** Describe your main areas of risk and how can the County help reduce the risks. Describe the County's main areas of risk and how you will attempt to reduce the risk to the County.
- 3. **Anticipated Project Schedule**
 - a. Describe your proposed schedule for implementing service. Offer a timeline with key milestones, including go/no-go points (e.g., specific legislation, subsidies, and access partnerships) for the proposed project.
 - b. If applicable, would you be able to begin service before the entire network is constructed? Are there areas of the County you would recommend be constructed first?
- 4. **Other information, advice, or counsel you would offer to Cuyahoga County with respect to this project**
 - a. Clearly state the level of access to County resources that would be needed, including real estate, technology, or information, and whether this access is desired or required to achieve the Project.
 - b. Describe the financial requirements you have of the County in order to enter into a partnership. If you do not address this question as to financial requirements, it will be assumed that you are interested in the partnership but have no financial requirements whatsoever of the County.

- c. Are there other ideas that are not addressed here that you believe the County should consider? Please share your guidance and suggestions.

Disclaimers

This RFI is issued for the purpose of obtaining information regarding potential procurement approaches and specifications for consideration by the Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation and Performance in preparing an RFP, if it decides to issue one.

Responding to this RFI is not a condition for eligibility to respond to any subsequent solicitation. Responses to this RFI will not have any bearing, positive or negative, on the evaluation of proposals or offers that may be received in response to any subsequent solicitation, if one is issued.

All information received by the Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation and Performance will become the property of the Cuyahoga County and will not be returned to the sender. There will be no acknowledgement by the Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation and Performance of receipt of the information. The acceptance of responses to this RFI places no obligations of any kind upon the Cuyahoga County.

Any information received from respondents to the RFI in any form can be used by the Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation and Performance without restriction for any purpose determined by the Cuyahoga County Office of Innovation and Performance.