

Town of Blowing Rock Sunset Drive Wi-Fi Expansion

Project Title

The title of this project will be "The Town of Blowing Rock Sunset Drive Wi-Fi Expansion" (Sunset Drive project).

Project Grantee

The project grantee will be The Town of Blowing Rock, NC (Town). The Town will handle the appropriate use of grant funds, contractor agreements, and ultimate provision of Wi-Fi in the downtown area.

Counties Served

While the Town is located within both Watauga County, NC and Caldwell County, NC, the project will influence change in only the Watauga County portion of the Town. Watauga and Caldwell Counties are both classified as "at-risk" counties by the ARC.

Goal/Strategy

The Sunset Drive project will meet ARC Goal 1, regarding economic opportunities. While this project directly provides infrastructure for the Town, local businesses, and visitors, it primarily functions to improve economic outcomes in the area. Free public Wi-Fi access will attract and retain visitors, create a healthy and vibrant community, increase customer satisfaction, promote business, ensure equitable resource distribution in the downtown area, and generate revenue for the Town.

The State Strategy addressed through the Sunset Drive project will involve economic opportunities. North Carolina (NC) has identified the necessity of tourism to the Western NC economy. By expanding free public Wi-Fi access in downtown Blowing Rock, businesses will have increased opportunities to interact with customers, visitors will be more satisfied, and the Town will continue to develop.

Purpose

The purpose of the Sunset Drive project will be to provide free public Wi-Fi access, increasing the following: (1) visitation to downtown Blowing Rock, (2) public (customer) satisfaction with the Town, (3) equity among downtown businesses, (4) attractive assets for all local businesses, and (5) patronage in the Town and businesses.

Funding

| <u>Source</u> | <u>Amount</u> | <u>Percentage</u> |
|----------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| ARC | \$9,100 | 70% |
| Town of Blowing Rock | \$3,900 | 30% (Match) |
| Total | 13,000 | 100% |

Project Description

Funds from the ARC would be provided either directly by the ARC, or by the Town, to a contractor for the Sunset Drive project. The contractor would operate under the discretion of the Town and would be responsible for the installment, maintenance, and monitoring of the Wi-Fi project. This process mimics a similar project on Main Street in which free public Wi-Fi was made available to Main Street visitors.

The contractor will install all hardware required on Sunset Drive. Following installation, the contractor will monitor services and perform any maintenance. Subsequent to the initial phase of the project, the Town will provide the contractor with any necessary funds to maintain and monitor Wi-Fi on Sunset

Drive. This provision of funds from the Town will ensure sustainability and continuation of the services following installation and initial provision of Wi-Fi.

Strategic Rationale

The problems/opportunities to be addressed include: (1) lack of access to Wi-Fi along Sunset Drive in downtown Blowing Rock, (2) need for additional infrastructure to encourage visitation and improve local economic opportunity for business owners, (3) need for educational resources to visitors who may use Wi-Fi to learn about Blowing Rock's assets and opportunities, and (4) create a method of introducing visitors to the area to improve customer experience both from the Town's perspective and from business owner perspective. This project is critical due to Blowing Rock's location in at-risk counties and need to provide high level services to visitors to ensure area economic well-being. This project supports a strategy initiated by the Town which involves provision of free public Wi-Fi; however, there is need to expand the Wi-Fi coverage area to ensure equity of infrastructure access. Currently, access to free public Wi-Fi is provided only along Main Street, and this is inequitable for businesses along Sunset Drive who may see more patronage should infrastructure be expanded. Expanding the Wi-Fi on Sunset Drive is a logical step for Blowing Rock to take in order to expand economic development efforts. The Town plans to continue Wi-Fi expansion following this project; however, the provision of ARC funds will aid community growth and increase project execution speeds.

Collaborative Partnership

The Town of Blowing Rock recognizes the importance of partnership in the grant process. For the purpose of this grant's execution, the Town will select a contractor with the capability to install, maintain, and monitor public Wi-Fi on Sunset Drive. The Town, with the help of the contractor, will prepare reports (in aggregate) on usage for the ARC's use as well as business owners for the purpose of attracting customers.

Project Sustainability and Capacity

The Town of Blowing Rock previously completed a similar project, expanding free public Wi-Fi access in the Main Street area. The previous project created access for all visitors to Blowing Rock's Main Street. Information on visitation can be provided by the contractor, and has been highly useful in determining frequented areas in downtown. The Main Street project remains under the supervision of the Town with the contractor offering services to ensure sustainability and continued Wi-Fi access for the public. The contractor continues to receive funds from the Town General Fund for Main Street Wi-Fi. Similar to the Main Street Wi-Fi service, the contractor would receive necessary funds from the Town to maintain service on Sunset Drive.

Impact Measures

Quantifiable information from the project will involve measurements of Wi-Fi service area, count of the number of Wi-Fi users along Sunset Drive, and reported customer increases from businesses along Sunset Drive and directly adjacent. Any increased interest in expanding business along Sunset Drive as a result of improved infrastructure will also be reported to the ARC. Data will be provided in aggregate to avoid any privacy issues which may otherwise arise.