



Looking out for our members



From the desk of
CEO & General Manager
Eddie Oldham

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our world in countless ways, some temporary and some permanent. However, one place we are very hopeful to see some continued movement and positive change is in the area of rural broadband. Rural broadband has been a developing issue for many years. We at Central Electric, along with N.C.'s other electric cooperatives, have been highlighting the issue of broadband service, or lack thereof, for many years.

As an electric cooperative serving rural members across Chatham, Harnett, Lee and Moore counties, we are grateful that more than \$140 million in state and federal funding has recently been awarded to connect unserved and underserved rural residents in our state. This is certainly a great start, however a far cry from the amount needed to truly jump-start this effort. Through talks with legislators, state and local officials, electric cooperatives have been pushing the immediate need for increased funding for rural broadband efforts.

In addition to talks for increased funding, we have also been active in voicing our concern that as grant funding creates a new market for broadband providers in our communities, we are rejecting efforts by for-profit special interests that would shift costs to N.C.'s rural consumers.

Rural communities have long awaited high speed connections because for-profit cable providers have been unwilling to invest in broadband infrastructure in sparsely populated areas. Despite that challenge, electric cooperatives for years have supported efforts to close the digital divide by exploring local solutions and facilitating expansion of access to broadband providers to utility poles quickly and at a fair rate.

Unfortunately, with the backing of a Fortune 100, for-profit cable company, a legislative attempt was recently made that would shift costs of "make ready" utility poles for new broadband infrastructure to electric co-ops and their members. What this means is that the costs associated with deploying broadband would be borne by you, the electric cooperative member, rather than the for-profit cable company. Should an attempt like this pass, special interests would receive more funding for their shareholders at the expense of rural consumers and further burden the very people who expanded rural broadband is intended to help.

Any type of proposed policy in that direction is wrong, and we will openly oppose it. Our members should not be expected to subsidize broadband deployment costs, especially after more than \$140 million in funding has been awarded for broadband expansion in N.C. It is in the best interest of rural people and communities to ensure that new federal and state funding is applied as intended to cover expanded access, and that rural co-op members are not burdened with unfair costs.

As not-for-profit, community-owned organizations, electric cooperatives remain focused on supporting efforts that bring opportunity and prosperity to our communities. However, we are also focused on keeping costs as low as possible for members and the costs of deploying broadband is no exception.

We will continue to advocate for the deployment of broadband access to underserved areas in N.C. and working with policy makers and those who are deploying broadband to ensure that access is expanded to our entire state, while advocating against policy changes that could burden rural consumers with unfair costs.

Until next time,