

Five Things to Consider Before BEAD Funding

The Somewhat Calm Before the BEAD Funding Waves - Five Ways to Get Ready and Prepare

There's a broadband industry maelstrom going on right now as the federal government, the FCC, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), and state governments aggressively plan and eventually deploy unprecedented resources of the [Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment \(BEAD\) Program](#). While local governments, broadband providers, and other stakeholder entities eagerly await the allocations to be made to each of their states, they've begun to participate in planning efforts undertaken in many states across the nation. The BEAD Program is part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law). The IIJA set apart more than \$65 billion for broadband infrastructure deployment, including—through the BEAD Program—a minimum of \$100 million to each state and \$25 million to each U.S. territory for creating robust, sustainable, and scalable broadband networks.

The allocations for state funding won't be official until midsummer, with some veteran state programs predicting the first rounds of BEAD funding in early- to mid-fall 2023. Some state allocations will begin even later; upon receiving federal funding, some states will require legislative authority before launching their BEAD funding allocations.

A plethora of articles have already been published describing specific and very technical aspects of the IIJA and BEAD program. Many have even made assumptions about how much each state will receive for the NTIA formulary, but we know that even the most prepared entity seeking to close the digital divide will need leadership and persistence. Therefore, if your state has completed its ARPA funding round, you may have some time before the funding programs are launched. This article focuses on the leadership aspect of the entities and providers described above. Between now and then, you can take time to prepare yourself and your organization to become vigorous advocates for more broadband funding for your area. Whether you work for a local county or other regional government that wants to bring broadband to your area or whether you work for a broadband provider looking for potential partners and funding, here are five leadership techniques to help you prepare for the full launch of the BEAD Program.

1. Understand your current reality. And trust that understanding.

There's much anxiety about the broadband availability maps being drawn, which will help determine which areas most need funding. The maps tell one story, but you know your area better than anybody else. At Finley, too often we hear stories from county officials and broadband providers who gave up when attempting to apply for funding because they saw that the state or federal maps of the proposed service area already showed the area as "served," and they did not have enough information at their disposal to refute the service levels.

Take stock of your situation—your region, communities, rural areas, and towns. Be prepared to be frustrated by the existing broadband maps, and then be ready to challenge them. Every state funding program allows you to refute their maps and provide evidence to show the current situation. Now—before grants are available—could be the perfect time to start gathering the information to make your

case. Interviews with residents and businesses, surveys of area users, and collecting speed test data for your region are all possible sources. Your company or local organization has a much better understanding than someone reviewing an application alongside hundreds of others seeking funding.

2. Get your house in order.

You don't leave on a road trip without planning your route and assembling music and snacks. You don't send your child to the first day of school without the right supplies and clothing. So, before the next round of grant applications begins, prepare yourself for what's coming. Here are three ways:

- A. *Start building relationships now (if you haven't already).* Don't wait for the grant cycle to reach out to potential partners—county officials or local broadband providers—and start discussing the future. Get in touch with people in your state who are also hoping for funding or who have already successfully funded projects, and learn what you can from them. Relationships need time to grow; don't wait until the last minute.
- B. *Take steps to be in the know.* Each state is required to hold planning and outreach events to get as much local input as possible, so they can build more robust plans for the impending funding. Find out when those are and attend them. Most state broadband programs have email distribution lists, host regular webinars, and have a team of professionals willing to connect with you. Other simple steps include establishing Google alerts with keywords, subscribing to news services, and becoming a member of trade associations that must stay current on broadband developments in your state and region.
- C. *If it's a priority, dedicate time and protect your calendar.* Schedule time now to research and prepare for upcoming broadband funding programs. When it arrives, you'll know what to do and have dedicated time for focused attention. Don't wait until your schedule is packed—block out time now. Encourage anyone in your organization likely to be involved in the planning process to do the same, host weekly sync-ups, and delegate items of importance. Your future selves will thank you for this forethought.

3. Find out about your potential partners' plans.

It's not what you know; sometimes, it's whom you know in advocating for funding. Whether you're on the public or private side, find out what your potential partners are doing now and hoping to do in the future. If you're a county official, meet with providers and determine their long-term plans within your area. The best source of broadband expansion is leveraging your existing providers.

If you're in the private sector, do you know who your county contacts are? State and federal granting agencies have built scoring mechanisms and qualitative measures into their programs to see evidence of an emerging public/private partnership, so you're missing the mark if you haven't gotten to know your government officials.

At Finley, we're often in the position of brokering relationships between governments and providers. We believe you can't begin that work too soon—don't find yourself scrambling for a partner when there's a funding deadline looming.

4. Foster your mindset to prepare for a marathon, not a sprint.

Start getting in the right frame of mind about the grant process and what success looks like for your area. Closing the digital divide will be a long journey with many ups and downs. Don't get discouraged when you face the possible no's—regroup, refocus, beef up the areas that need work, and resubmit in future rounds. Your ability to adapt quickly will lead to a stronger yes soon. If you're searching for a provider to partner with, and your first—or second or third—choice isn't interested, don't give up. A willing provider may be on the horizon, so don't sacrifice your vision of being fully connected. As the adage says, "If at first, you don't succeed, try, try again."

5. If it sounds too good to be true, it is.

Follow your gut. At Finley, we've seen situations where a provider presents a proposal to a local government that promises, for example, broadband coverage to every home in the county quickly and inexpensively. Sounds great, right? But we know from experience that such offers are sometimes hollow. If you feel skeptical about a proposal, pay attention to that feeling—you probably need to do some investigation of your own. You can and should ask for information about past projects in other communities, including the names and contact information of the provider's partners, project details, and so on. Do your homework before you accept a proposal that sounds too good to be true.

A final note to providers: This is where you have a clear opportunity to demonstrate accountability. Don't risk your reputation by promising something you can't deliver. Partnerships need to be built on trust, and you play a big part in closing the divide for good.

In closing...

Many firms want to profit from the historic levels of funding available for broadband development. Make sure you choose someone with the experience needed to navigate these waters. Finley would love to talk with you if you need help getting organized, advocating for your project, and applying for grants. We have decades of experience helping public and private entities build broadband networks, brokering conversations between governments and providers, and ensuring projects stay on schedule and within budget. The next several years will be a busy and complex time. Finley would be honored to walk with you starting today and beyond the funding waves upon us.



About the Author:

Tim Arbeiter has more than 22 years of multi-faceted expertise with extensive knowledge of the broadband arena. Tim identifies and supports the long-term growth of Finley clients. This includes defining programs and measurable objectives, strategic planning, feasibility studies analysis, and other initiatives. His key areas of expertise include broadband policy legislation and program design, economic development and revitalization, strategic planning, state and federal funding strategies, public outreach, and research for advanced broadband deployment. He is also proficient in all aspects of broadband leadership, financing, funding, approach, and methodologies.

Tim has been a Certified Economic Developer CEcD, IEDC, is a Missouri Leadership Academy graduate, holds a Masters in Guidance and Counseling and a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration – Finance from Southeast Missouri State University.

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