

Be Prepared: 12 Practical Steps to Take While You Wait for BEAD and Other Funding

By Tim Arbeiter

Broadband service providers (BSPs), utility companies, and local municipalities are in a waiting pattern as they seek to expand their networks with the upcoming release of the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program funding. While you wait for the BEAD grants, there are important steps you can take to prepare. Don't be the college student who procrastinates—be the A+ student who organizes their notes, readings, and materials ahead of the test so they're ready when it comes.

We've included 12 practical, tactical steps to help set you up well for the BEAD funding period. Also, note that while BEAD Program funding is what the industry is collectively waiting for now, these steps are applicable whenever you are waiting for a funding source.

We've arranged our twelve tips (with no priority in their order) into three categories: (1) internal administrative tasks, (2) tips related to partners, vendors, and contractors, and (3) reviewing your plant.

I. Internal administrative tasks

1. Prepare for mapping challenges. Depending on what state(s) you're working in and with, the mapping challenge period may come sooner than you think. There are several ways to prepare. Ensure the Broadband Data Collection (BDC) findings released in November are current and accurate. Look up your competitors to see what they are reporting about service in your territory. Essentially, make sure that, when the state opens the mapping challenge round, you have everything at your fingertips can tackle your challenge quickly and efficiently.

2. Revisit- and possibly reconsider- your planned areas of expansion. Now is the time to ensure that the areas where you plan to expand your network are still the right choices. Has new information come to light—maybe as you prepared for the mapping challenge period—that either makes you question a certain community or sparks your interest in a new community? Double-checking your expansion plans can avoid scrambling later, when new information (which you could have discovered today) comes to light.

3. Check the health of your finances. Potential funding sources like BEAD want to know that you are financially healthy, so don't wait to take steps to put your best foot forward. Make it clear that your company's finances are in good shape. If you are due for an audit, start that process now so it is completed by the time the grant funding is released. Ensure that your company has the debt capacity to undertake the projects for which you're seeking grants.

4. Communicate with local leaders about current and future efforts. Service providers planning to expand their network need to talk with the local leaders whose decisions will affect your plans. These conversations should include information about your immediate plans and where you hope to take your network—and how you hope to enhance the community—in the future. Ensuring local leadership is on board will serve you well in the long run, as their support is critical to your success.

5. Update and organize administrative materials and profiles. Get your house in order from an organizational perspective. Revise your corporate resumes and your organization chart. Make sure your state business registration, state vendor, and sam.gov profile are current (and if you don't have your unique ID number on the portal, get it now). Don't let small details like these hold you up once it's time to submit information to the BEAD Program—get everything in order now so you don't have to do it later.

II. Tips related to partners, vendors, and contractors

6. Meet with your existing contractors. Shore up your existing relationships to make sure they are where they need to be, and, if not, to ensure you have time to make new arrangements if needed. First, explain your plans to your existing contractors and get assurances that they have the resources they need to support you. You don't want to receive funding only to learn that your contractors can't get the job done.

7. Visit with vendors and suppliers. Similar to our advice about contractors, make sure your vendors and suppliers are ready to fulfill your needs. Get current and forecasted pricing from your vendors, find out if they have any new offerings, and see if any products or services are changing in the near future. Check with suppliers to make sure they aren't facing supply chain issues, so you may plan accordingly if they are going to experience delays in the materials and/or equipment availabilities will.

8. Review opportunities for new relationships. This step is directly related to #6 and #7. If you have doubts or concerns about your existing contractors, vendors, and/or suppliers, address them now. Addressing this now before seeking additional funding assistance can greatly benefit your firm—rather than risk issues arising when you're in the middle of expanding your network. Evaluate other contractors, vendors, and suppliers for efficiency, cost, and other factors that may lead to your project being successful. And, although it's painful, be prepared to establish new relationships if necessary.

9. Update your organizational profile with your contractors, vendors, and suppliers. You might be surprised how many companies have outdated information filed with their contractors, vendors, and suppliers. The BEAD Program and other funding sources want you to demonstrate the soundness of your existing business relationships before you're awarded. If you can say that you have recently updated your company profile with these outside entities, you will be one step ahead in your preparation. It doesn't take much time, and it's worth the payoff for a smooth grant process.

III. Reviewing your plant

10. Audit the inventory of your existing physical plant. The BEAD Program and other funding sources give you the opportunity to tout your existing network; they want you to demonstrate redundancy, resilience, and scalability. While you're waiting for funding, gather data points to prove what your physical plant can do and what it will be capable of in the future.

11. Brainstorm ways to enhance your network. When it comes to your network, maybe you haven't thought of everything. Waiting for funding is an opportunity to dream while there's still time. Are there ways you can strengthen your infrastructure and offer a more resilient network? Have you considered all the opportunities for redundancies, design options, and construction possibilities? Don't rely on the plans you made six months or a year ago. If you have the time, revisit them now and make sure they still provide the best direction.

12. Evaluate your current technology. Related to #11, waiting for funding is a good time to make sure the technology your network relies on is the best for your needs. Will the technology meet the demands of your network in the future? As you talk to your existing vendors (see tip #7), ask them what new technology they offer and what they consider most optimal for your situation. It's possible a new technology strategy will serve your company better than what you have now.

Time waiting doesn't have to be time wasted. Take advantage of the lull before BEAD Program funding is released to do your due diligence and make sure you are ready. If you follow these practical steps, you will find yourself much better prepared to expand your network once you receive your funding. And, if you need any help along the way, the Finley team would be honored to talk with you and help you prepare.

About Finley Engineering

Finley Engineering is a full-service engineering consultancy with a successful history of providing expertise in communications technology and energy engineering services for a wide variety of clients such as independent telecom providers, electric cooperatives, municipalities, competitive providers and government entities.

About the Author- Tim Arbeiter

With a background in government and the non-profit sectors, Tim can assist in helping clients stay up to date on legislative funding at the federal and state levels, consult with public and private stakeholders on win-win partnerships for broadband expansion, devise actionable steps that will propel implementation efforts. Tim is a member of the International Economic Development Council (IEDC). Previously before joining the Finley team, Tim served as the Director of Broadband Development for the State of Missouri. During his tenure, Tim served on the NTIA State Broadband Leaders Network and the National Governors Association Broadband Advisors Council.

