



Hardin County, Texas Executive Summary


Connected
A CONNECTED NATION Initiative
Addressing Your Community's Unique Needs

SETRPC
SOUTH EAST TEXAS REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION



May 2022

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This project was funded by the Economic Development Administration (EDA)
Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.



Overview



Today, technology plays a pivotal role in how businesses operate, how institutions provide services, and where consumers choose to live, work, and play. A community's success has become dependent on how broadly and deeply it adopts technology resources, which include access to reliable, high-speed networks; the digital literacy of residents; and the use of online resources for local business, government, and leisure.

As such, the Hardin County Broadband Committee partnered with the Connected Nation Texas (CN Texas) Connected Community Engagement Program to conduct a study designed to determine the availability of broadband infrastructure; how county residents are adopting and using broadband services; and what action steps would have the greatest impact toward improving broadband access, adoption, and usage across every local sector.

Pursuant of this goal, between February and March 2022, Hardin County conducted a comprehensive survey of broadband technology access and adoption across the community that collected responses from 2,118 households. CN Texas staff also met with community officials to determine community needs and gather qualitative data for consideration in the study. This project was funded by the Economic Development Administration (EDA) Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

This study approached broadband holistically, focusing on the quality of life offered when residents and community leaders alike access, adopt, and use broadband in a productive and meaningful capacity. With this approach, the assessment identified issues and action opportunities necessary to close the local Digital Divide.

Data collected as part of the engagement played an integral role in developing a unique, locally informed action plan for Hardin County. This document provides a summary of that assessment, as well as recommendations for improving broadband and technology access, adoption, and usage. Additionally, CN Texas created an interactive map. To access that map, please click [here](#).

HARDIN COUNTY, TEXAS QUICK FACTS

Population

56,231

Households

21,188

Median Household Income

\$61,221

Poverty Rate

12.0%

Adults with a Bachelor's Degree
or Higher

18.1%

Hispanic or Latino

6.08%

Households with
Broadband Access¹

87.31%

Source:

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=0500000US48199>

¹The current FCC definition of broadband is a minimum of 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload. These data are derived from Connected Nation Texas and last updated in January 2022. <https://connectednation.org/texas/planning/>



40.2% of households in Hardin County report subscribing to fixed internet service

*For households that do not subscribe to home internet service, the top barriers are a **lack of broadband service availability** and the **cost of internet service**.*

*Only **80.21%** of households in Hardin County have access to internet service at speeds needed to run many modern applications (100 Mbps downstream and 10 Mbps upstream). Statewide, **93.55%** of households have internet access at these speeds.*

*Nearly 3 out of 5 employed survey respondents in Hardin County (**59.7%**) report teleworking in some capacity. Of those, **25%** telework every day, and an additional **26%** telework several days per week.*

***54.5% of households and 73.5% of businesses** reported that they were dissatisfied with their current internet service. The top reasons for dissatisfaction were slow speeds, high prices, and unreliable connections.*

*More than 9 out of 10 households (**95.4%**) said they would like to have improved or additional options for home internet service.*



Infrastructure Results



According to CN Texas broadband data initially released in January 2022, followed by additional public feedback, field validation, and provider input, 87.31% of Hardin County households have access to broadband of at least 25/3 Mbps, the current definition of broadband set forth by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Broadband service in Hardin County is distributed throughout the county.

Below is the list of internet service providers (ISPs) in Hardin County.

BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE QUICK FACTS

Unserved Households (25/3 Mbps)
2,598

Households Served (10/1 Mbps)
94.41%

Households Served (25/3 Mbps)
87.31%

Households Served (50/5 Mbps)
80.95%

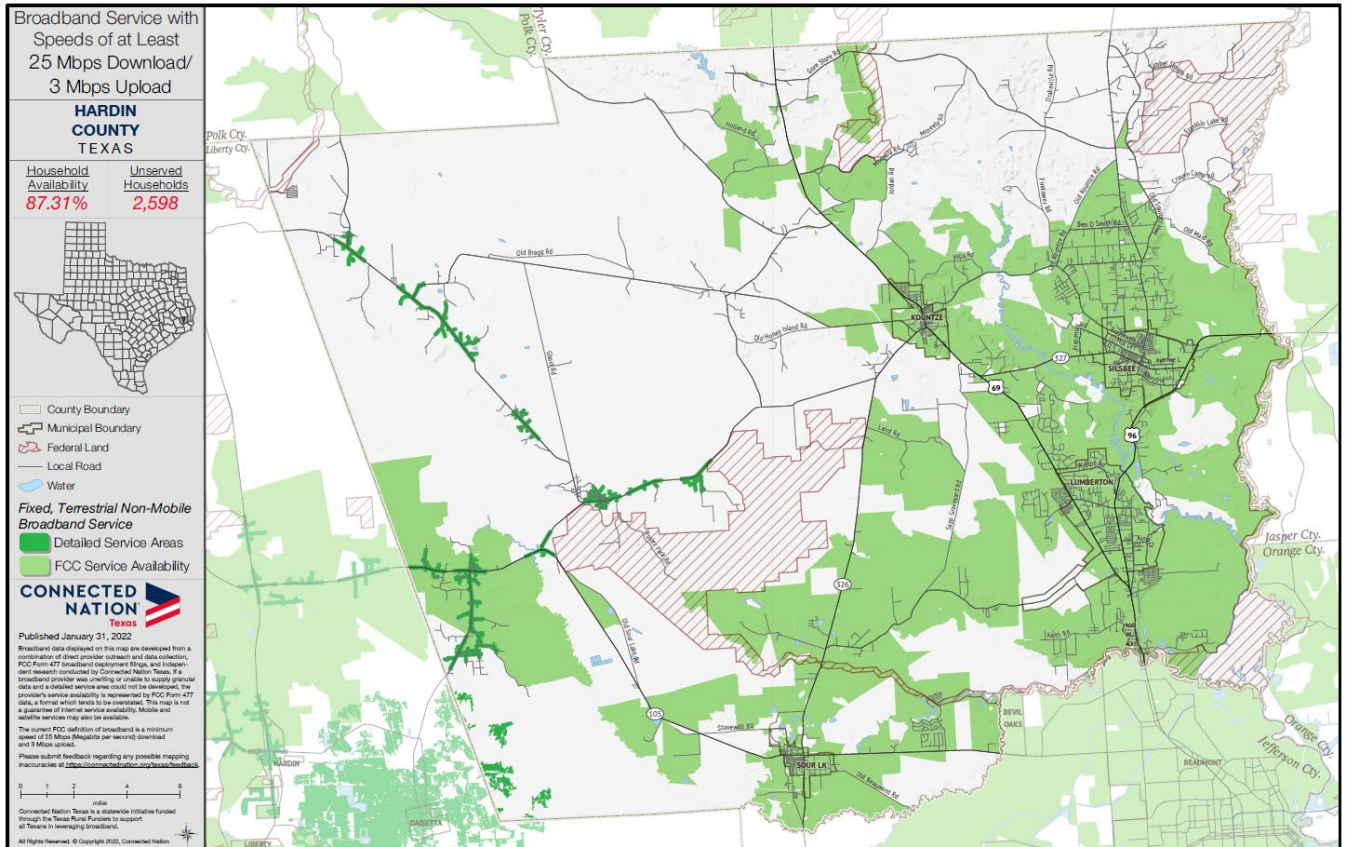
Households Served (100/10 Mbps)
80.21%

Broadband data released by CN Texas in January 2022:
<https://connectednation.org/texas/mapping-analysis/>

PROVIDER	TECHNOLOGY	MAXIMUM DOWNLOAD SPEED (Mbps)	MAXIMUM UPLOAD SPEED (Mbps)
AT&T Southwest	Fiber	1000	1000
	DSL	25	2
	Fixed Wireless	10	1
Eastex Telephone Cooperative Inc.	DSL	10	1
Frontier Communications	DSL	100	10
Rise Broadband	Fixed Wireless	50	10
Cable One Inc. - Sparklight	Cable	1000	50
Charter Communications (Spectrum)	Cable	940	35
T-Mobile	Fixed Wireless	25	3



Below is Hardin County's (25/3 Mbps) map. To access the full map, go to <https://connectednation.org/texas/county-maps/> and select Hardin County from the list. Portions of the county are served by internet service providers (ISPs) offering slower advertised speeds, and those areas are not shown on this map.



Broadband data published by CN Texas in 2022: <https://connectednation.org/texas/mapping-analysis/>

The first step in understanding the status of broadband infrastructure in Hardin County and statewide is having accurate maps. Accordingly, CN Texas works with providers to develop a variety of broadband maps at the state and county level. Data shown on this map are derived from a combination of direct provider outreach and data collection, FCC Form 477 broadband deployment filings, and independent research conducted by CN Texas. If a provider was unable or unwilling to supply granular data and a detailed service area could not be developed, the provider's service is represented by Form 477 data alone, a format that tends to overstate the service territory.

To access the map as a PDF, click [here](#).



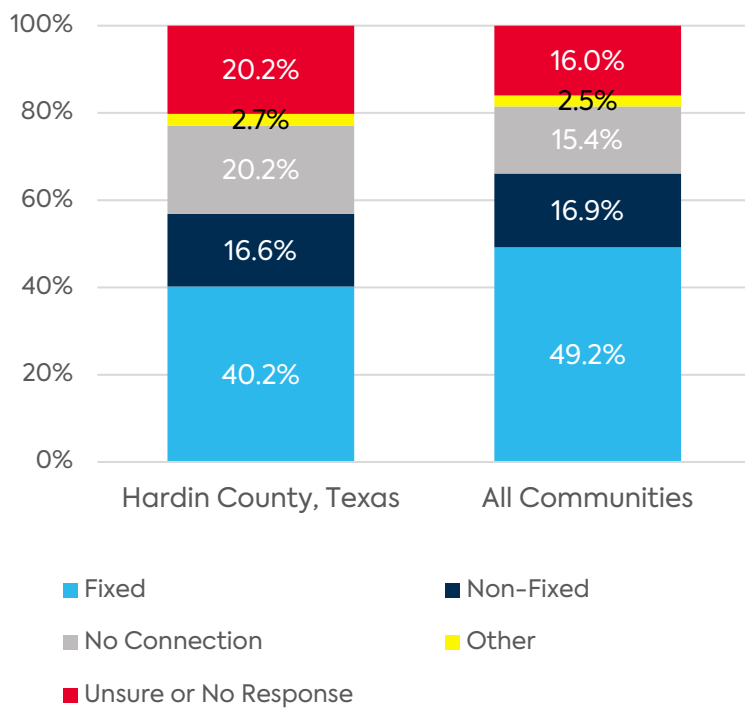
Household Survey Results

Household Survey Results



The following section provides an overview of results from a broadband survey conducted in Hardin County between February and March 2022. Altogether, CN Texas received 2,118 completed surveys from households across the county; respondents provided insights into their internet connectivity or lack thereof. Data from Hardin County are compared to data from hundreds of other rural Connected communities that participated in the program across Michigan, Ohio, Texas, and Pennsylvania to benchmark and identify areas for improvement.

Home Broadband Adoption

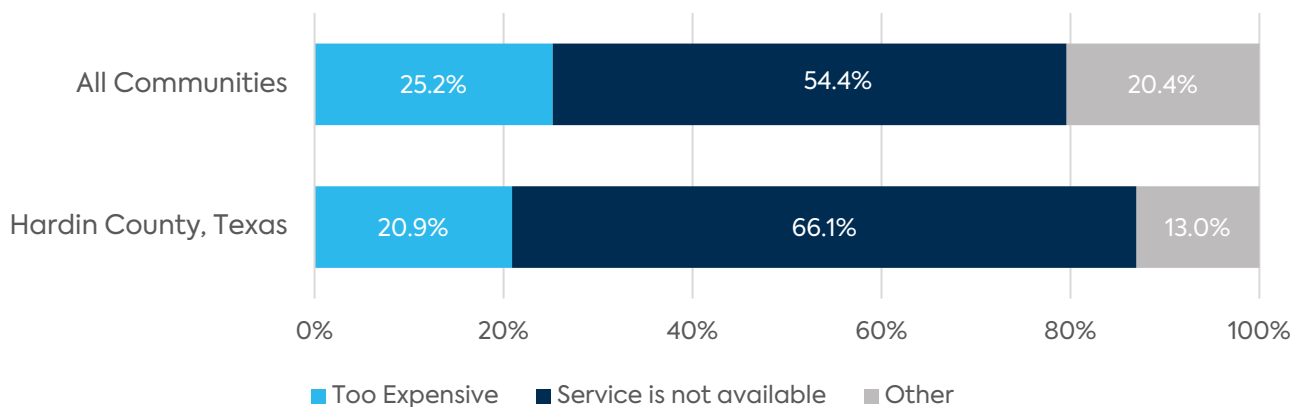


ADOPTION

In Hardin County, 40.2% of households that took the survey subscribe to fixed broadband service delivered via a cable, DSL, fiber, or fixed wireless technology, while 16.6% indicate they have internet service delivered via dial-up, satellite, or a mobile wireless service. This leaves 20.2% without internet and 20.2% of survey respondents unsure of what service they have, or provided no response.

Among those without a home internet connection, 20.9% said they did not have broadband because it was too expensive. An additional 66.1% say service is not available.

Primary Barrier

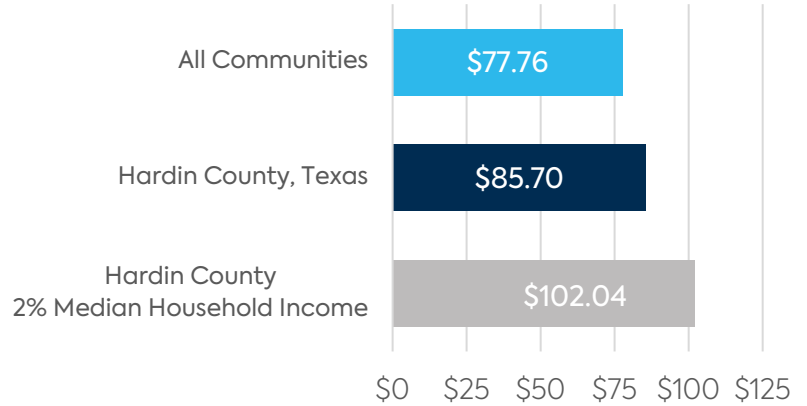




CONNECTION DETAILS

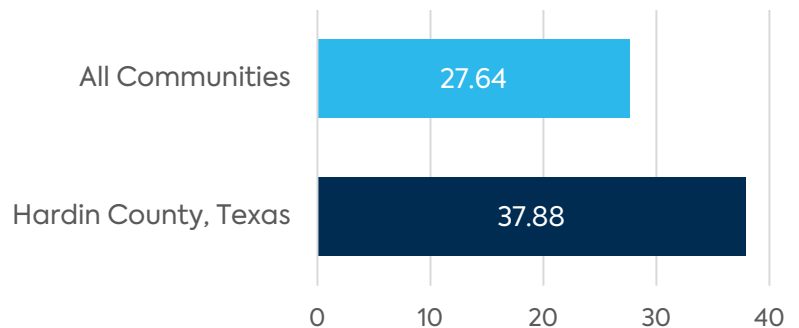
Two percent of monthly income is a recognized standard for measuring the affordability of a home internet connection. Respondents indicate that, on average, their internet connection costs about \$85.70 per month. This is higher than the monthly cost paid in other communities (\$77.76). Two percent of the median household income in Hardin County is \$102.04 per month.

Average Monthly Cost

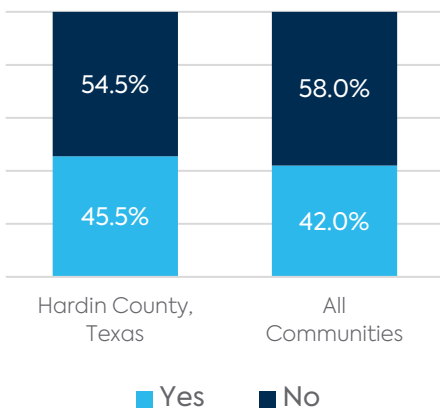


The FCC currently defines broadband as an internet connection with a download speed of at least 25 Mbps and upload speed of at least 3 Mbps. On average, respondents indicate that their connection's download speed is 37.88 Mbps, which is above the minimum defined speed.

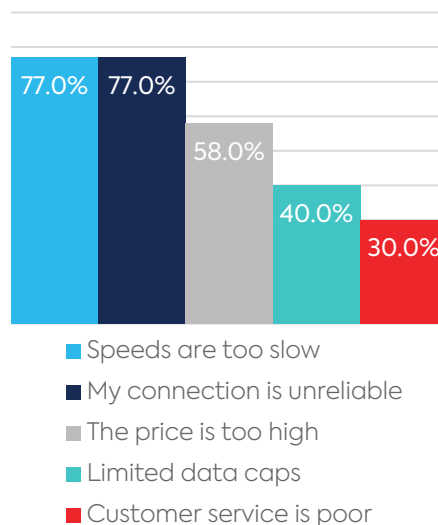
Average Speeds (Mbps)



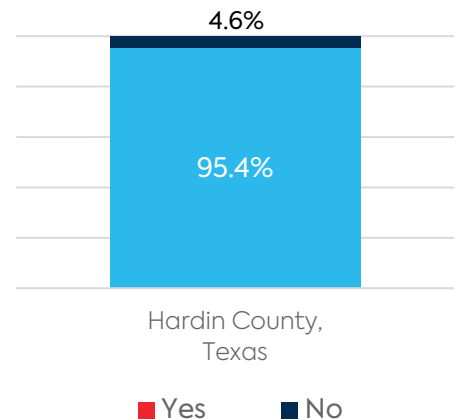
Does Your Internet Meet Your Needs?



Why Doesn't Your Internet Meet Your Needs?



Are You Interested in More Choices at Home?



Household Survey Results



Competition provides residents with choices for service, allowing households the ability to switch providers if their current service does not meet their needs. Less than half (45.5%) of responding households indicate that their internet connection meets their needs. This is a slightly higher rate of satisfaction than among households in other communities (42.0%).

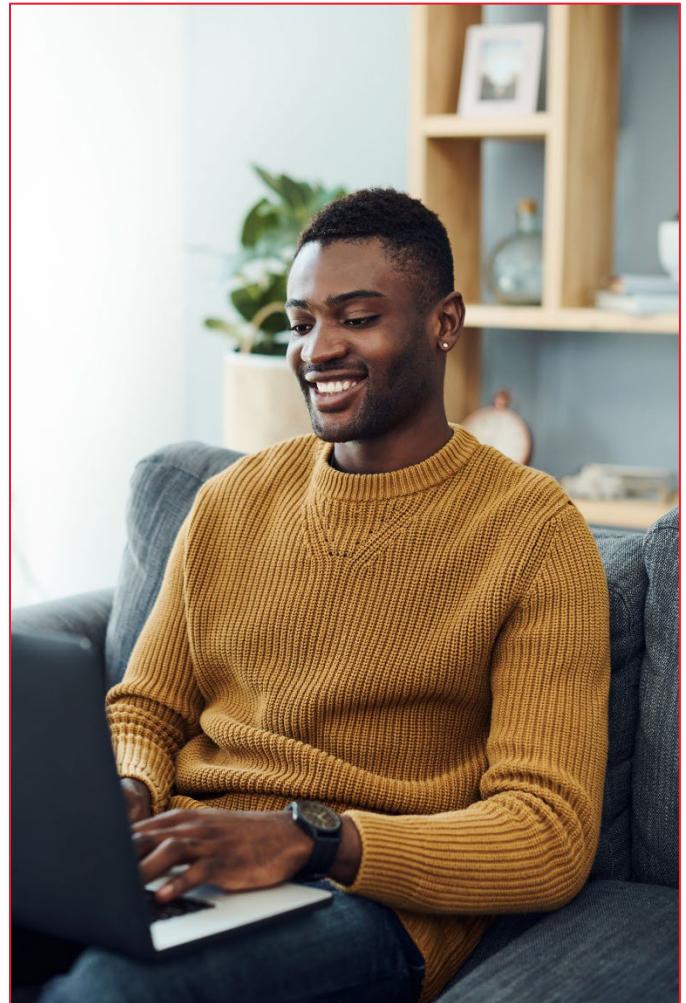
When asked why their connection does not meet their needs, 77% of dissatisfied households indicate that their speed is too slow, 77% say their connections are unreliable, and 58% indicate that the price is too high. Respondents could choose more than one reason for dissatisfaction.

Finally, nearly all respondents (95.4%) indicate that they are interested in additional internet choices for their home.

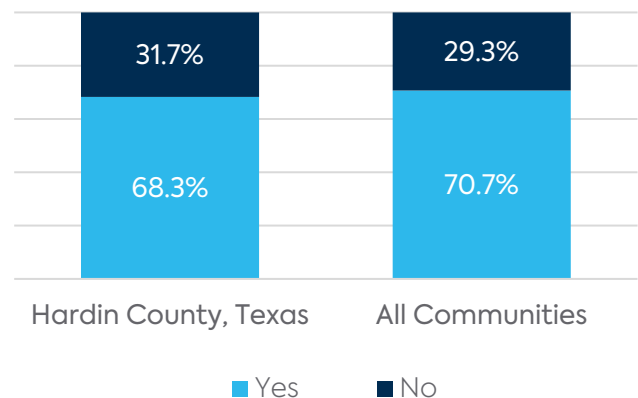
MOBILE CONNECTIVITY

A little more than 2 out of 3 (68.3 %) of households reported that they subscribe to mobile internet service that they access via a smartphone or similar mobile device. This is similar to what is reported in other Connected communities (70.7%).

Additionally, 43.1% of mobile-connected households report that they either rely on those mobile connections as their primary source of home internet connectivity or use mobile service to connect other household devices to the internet.



Households Subscribing to Mobile Internet Service



Household Survey Results



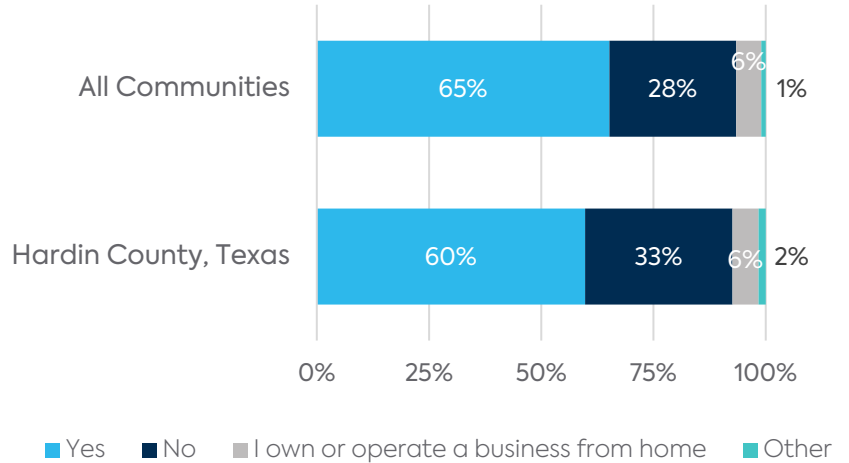
TELEWORK

Teleworking, or telecommuting, refers to working outside of the conventional workplace by way of telecommunications or computer-based technology. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many organizations to allow their staff to telework.

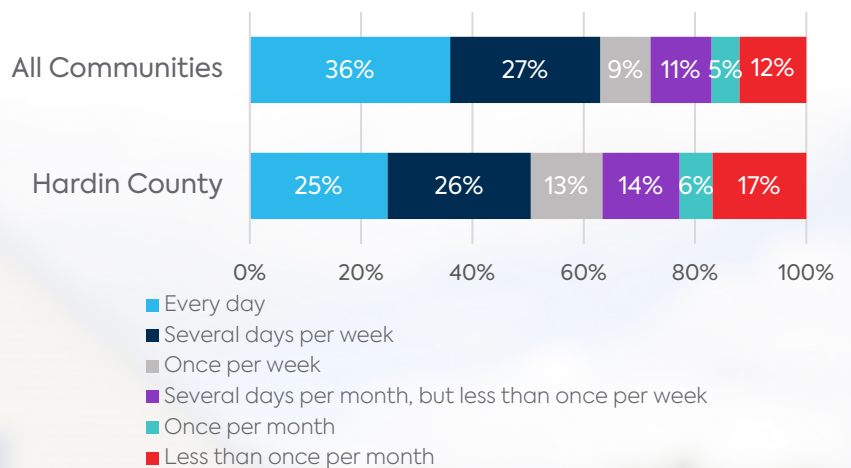
Teleworking is quickly becoming a critical part of growing a local economy because it represents an opportunity to attract and retain employees even when employees are not located in the same community as their employers. However, this only works if those employees have access to advanced broadband infrastructure.

Approximately 60% of employed respondents in Hardin County telework in some capacity. One-quarter (25% of this group) telework every day.

Do You Currently Telework?



How Frequently Do You Telework?





Recommendations



The following recommendations are presented to assist Hardin County in expanding broadband access and adoption throughout the community.

Between February and March 2022, Hardin County partnered with Connected Nation Texas to better understand the community's broadband landscape. The survey results and Connected Nation maps reveal two important themes: first, internet access is available in the majority of Hardin County and second, residents want faster broadband speeds. Current maps show 87.31% of the county has access to 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload. The average download speed is 37.88 Mbps. With this data, Hardin County is positioned to tackle broadband needs and promote economic growth for residents, businesses, agriculture, education, and health care. Developing public-private partnerships (P3) with trusted providers, offering alternatives to improve customer service, providing digital literacy learning opportunities, and taking advantage of federal and state funding as it becomes available will position Hardin County to increase digital opportunities for all its residents.

Goal 1: Prioritize local leadership in Hardin County for expansion of broadband access, adoption, and sustainability.

Objective:

Federal, state, and local governments agree that broadband expansion and services are essential for the economic development of rural communities.

Actions:

Action 1 – After working with Judge McDaniel and Hardin County for several months, the county should dedicate a person, broadband team, or regional representative to ensure its interests and needs are being met, and to manage growth and use resources wisely. Duties should include:

1. Deploying Requests for Quotes (RFQs) for services related to broadband deployment and maintenance of owned broadband infrastructure.
2. Providing monthly updates to the County Judge and Commissioners Court regarding activities surrounding broadband.
3. Establishing relationships with current providers and open communication with potential new providers.



4. Establishing relationships with Hardin County’s legislators and/or their staff overseeing broadband grants, subsidies, and/or loans that are available through the federal and state governments. Below are links to each legislator’s office:

1. [U.S. Representative Brian Babin](#)
2. [State Senator Robert Nichols](#)
3. [State Representative James White](#)
4. [Effective January 2023, State Representative Ernest Bailes](#)

Action 2 – Determine Hardin County’s broadband priorities, such as:

1. Enhanced services
2. Equity and service for all
3. Public control over infrastructure
4. Provider competition
5. Risk avoidance and redundancy, etc.

Action 3 – Examine models of public-private partnerships:

Public-private partnerships (P3s) take many forms, limited only by the imagination and legal framework in which the municipality operates.

A public-private partnership should not be simply seen as a method of financing. The strength of these partnerships is that each party brings something important to the table that the other doesn’t have or can’t easily acquire. Hardin County can offer infrastructure (publicly owned building rooftops, light poles, towers, and other vertical assets for mounting infrastructure) for the deployment of a network, as well as committed anchor tenants, and possible funding sources. Private-sector partners bring network-building and operations experience.

1. **Model 1: Private Investment, Public Facilitation:** Make available public assets, share geographic information, systems data, and streamline permitting and inspection processes. Offer economic development incentives to attract private broadband investment.
2. **Model 2: Private Execution, Public Funding:** Identify revenue streams that can be directed to a private partner. Funding may include appropriated payments from the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds established by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund, Reconnect Loan and Grant Program, Emergency Connectivity Fund, and several others [here](#). New streams of revenue are becoming available from the FCC and/or state government.
3. **Model 3: Shared Investment and Risk:** Evaluate how to best use assets to attract private investment, evaluate funding new assets to attract private investment, evaluate building new broadband assets for businesses and/or homes that can be leased to private ISPs.

Action 4 – Deploy an RFQ for an inventory of community broadband assets. This will help the



county understand its assets and how they can be utilized by private broadband companies that are currently working in the county.

Assets may include anchor tenants, antennas, building rooftops, light poles, and towers the cities or county may own. Understanding the barriers service providers face (discussed in Goal 3) can help establish the best P3. Current service providers in Hardin County include:

1. AT&T Southwest
2. Charter Communications (Spectrum)
3. Eastex Telephone Cooperative Inc.
4. Frontier Communications
5. Rise Broadband
6. Cable One Inc. – Sparklight
7. T-Mobile

Responsible Party:

The County Judge and Commissioners Court would be responsible for establishing the broadband office or team and future P3 contracts.

Feedback from broadband providers, businesses, residents, and anchor institutions would be valuable.

Timeline:

Developing a broadband team and/or hiring a broadband director should be done within three months of approving this plan.

Resources:

[Connected Nation supports communities in broadband planning, deployment, and digital inclusion](#)

[Becoming Broadband Ready](#)

[States consider a range of options to bring broadband to rural America](#)

[Public-private partnerships key to providing broadband for all](#)

[Era of the Broadband public-private partnerships](#)

[How to write an RFI, RFQ, and RFP when choosing an internet service provider as a partner](#)



Goal 2: Track state and federal broadband funding as it becomes available to stay current with opportunities.

Objective:

Hardin County should understand available funding programs and be ready to apply for them. The federal government continues to release new opportunities for funding at a rapid pace, and the [Texas Broadband Development Office](#) is not far behind.

Actions:

Action 1 – Remain current on broadband funding opportunities. Below is a list of current and future funding opportunities:

Program Name	Responsible Entity	Features	Eligibility	How to Apply
Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF)	U.S. Department of Treasury manages the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA)	The funds provide flexibility in eligible broadband investments to address challenges with access, affordability, and reliability. Note - these funds may be used for other things.	State, local, and tribal governments: Texas has received over \$15B from SLFRF	Information may be found here
Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund (CCPF)	U.S. Department of Treasury manages the ARPA	Carry out projects that directly enable work, education, and health monitoring, including remote options, in response to the pandemic.	State of Texas. The funding is allocated through the Broadband Development Office. Texas has until September 24, 2022, to submit its plan on how it intends to use this fund. Texas has received \$500M+	N/A for local governments: Additional information may be found here .

Recommendations



Program Name	Responsible Entity	Features	Eligibility	How to Apply
E-Rate	Universal Service Administrative Co.	Eligible schools and libraries may receive discounts on telecommunications, telecommunications services, and Internet access, as well as internal connections, managed internal broadband services and basic maintenance of internal connections. See Goal 6 for additional information on E-Rate for Hardin County schools.	Schools and libraries	Information may be found here
National Digital Navigator Corps	National Digital Inclusion Alliance	Creates a National Digital Navigator Corps in rural and tribal areas. The grant places a digital navigator in 18 communities to connect individuals with the technological resources that are most helpful to communities.	When the application opens, established community organizations. \$10M grant funded by Google.	Information may be found here
Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program	National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)	Broadband deployment in unserved/underserved areas, broadband adoption, connecting anchor institutions, etc.	Texas will receive at least \$100M from BEAD and likely much more. A total of \$42.45B will be allocated to states. These dollars are not expected until 2023 at the earliest.	Information may be found here

Recommendations



Program Name	Responsible Entity	Features	Eligibility	How to Apply
<p>Digital Equity Act (DEA) Grant Programs</p>	<p>National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)</p>	<p>Digital Equity Act State Planning Grants: \$60M to states for developing State Digital Equity Plans</p> <p>State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program: \$1.44B to states for implementing State Digital Equity Plans</p> <p>Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program: -\$1.25B to grantees for digital inclusion activities</p>	<p>The state of Texas is eligible for the Digital Equity Act and the State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program.</p> <p>Entities eligible for the Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program include: the state of Texas, political subdivisions, agency, or instrumentality of a state; tribal governments; nonprofit entities; community anchor institutions; local educational agencies; and entities that carry out workforce development programs.</p>	<p>Information may be found here</p>



Program Name	Responsible Entity	Features	Eligibility	How to Apply
Middle Mile Broadband Infrastructure Program	NTIA established under IIJA	A \$1B program to fund the construction, improvement, or acquisition of middle-mile infrastructure.	Eligible applicants include states, political subdivisions, tribal governments, technology companies, electric utilities, utility cooperatives, public utility districts, telecommunications companies, telecommunications cooperatives, nonprofit foundations, nonprofit corporations, nonprofit institutions, nonprofit associations, regional planning councils, native entities, or economic development authorities.	Information may be found here
ReConnect Loan and Grant Program	U.S. Department of Agriculture	Encourages the expansion of broadband services to rural areas by awarding grants and low-interest loans to eligible broadband service providers in areas without sufficient access to broadband.	States, local governments, or any agency, subdivision, instrumentality, or political subdivision; a territory or possession of the United States; an Indian tribe; nonprofit entities: for-profit corporations; limited liability companies; cooperative or mutual organizations	Current round closed in March 2022. Broadband teams should watch out for the next round of funding.

This is not a comprehensive list, and opportunities may change frequently.

Action 2 – Hire or contract with an experienced grant writer who is familiar with federal and state grant programs to help Hardin County apply for funding. There may be opportunities to partner with local universities, neighboring counties, or other state offices. Using the services of an



experienced grant writer can head off delays in funding or prevent applications from being excluded from consideration. Lamar University is based in Beaumont County but serves Hardin County communities and could share a grant writer. Also, South East Texas Regional Planning Commission (SETRPC) works with Orange, Jefferson, Jasper, and Hardin counties and could house a grant writer if each county shares expenses. Bob Dickinson, Director of Transportation & Environmental Resources with SETRPC, could help arrange the collaboration.

Responsible Parties:

Local broadband director, broadband team, or regional advocate, County Commissioners, and County Judge.

Goal 3: Eliminate barriers to broadband access.

Objective:

ISPs are more likely to engage in a community that is easy to work with as a partner. Eliminating red tape can be inviting for new providers and speed up deployment of broadband. The Hardin County survey states 66.1% of households that do not subscribe to home internet service cite a lack of available service is their main reason for not subscribing. The survey also shows that 43.2% of households that subscribe to mobile internet service use mobile devices or smartphones as their primary way to connect to the internet at home or use their phones to connect other household devices to the internet. Although the Rural Development Opportunity Fund (RDOF) will bring new infrastructure, it will not eliminate all barriers to close the Digital Divide and provide competition.

Actions:

Action 1 – Establish a relationship with the RDOF winner, Charter Communications (Spectrum), and all local providers. Set up meetings with each company’s representative and discuss plans for future expansion, barriers to expansion, and associated costs. Connected Nation can provide a list of questions to ask the providers to better understand their offerings. Some questions may include:

- Do you offer plans without data caps?
- Are the speeds you offer guaranteed or “best effort?”
- Do you participate in the Affordable Connectivity Program?
- Are you willing to participate in a public-private-partnership?

Note: Judge McDaniel, along with several other County Judges, met with Ed Serna of Charter Communications (Spectrum) about plans to use its RDOF award. Mr. Serna advised that Charter plans to do all approved work inside Hardin County, but there still will be gaps that Judge McDaniel



will need to address. The broadband team, once established, should host a second meeting with Charter Communications to address more specific concerns the county may have, such as making sure underserved and unserved areas are connected and ways it can support faster buildout of planned work.

Action 2 – Create or update county and cities’ websites to instruct internet service providers how to do business in their community, remove barriers, and streamline processes. Hardin County is ahead of others when it comes to making permit applications available online, including a “development permit application,” but there is nothing specific for broadband operators. The Hardin County [website](#) is a good place to include all vendor information and electronic forms vendors can download, including local “dig-once policies.” A dig-once policy may require county/public works to coordinate with providers to install fiber or conduit whenever ground is broken on a public right-of-way.

Responsible Parties:

The broadband director, a broadband team, a regional advocate, and county and cities’ IT directors should collaborate to include all important information on the websites. The County Judge and Commissioners should set local policies with input from the broadband director or broadband team. The county broadband director or team should be meet with local providers to discuss offerings of their services. Providers in Hardin County include:

1. AT&T Southwest
2. Charter Communications (Spectrum)
3. Eastex Telephone Cooperative Inc.
4. Frontier Communications
5. Rise Broadband
6. Cable One Inc. – Sparklight
7. T-Mobile

Resources:

[Specific challenges in rural America to providing internet](#)

[It is a matter of economic growth for rural America](#)

[Social and economic effects of lack of Broadband in rural America](#)

Timeline:



County meetings with providers should be scheduled within three months of this action plan.

Goal 4: Increase the presence of public libraries in Hardin County.

Objective:

There is no doubt libraries will continue to play an important role for digital equity and digital literacy in their communities. Therefore, libraries must increase their offerings for free public Wi-Fi and free digital learning tools. As stated in Goal 2, the NDIA is offering the National Digital Navigator Corps grant to train a digital navigator in rural communities. Libraries in Hardin County are eligible to apply for this grant, as they are an important anchor institution in the community. The grant will support the hiring of the community-based digital navigator alongside programmatic and technical support. More information may be found [here](#).

Action 1 – Hardin County should review the use of digital resources, social media, and the community’s awareness of these resources, among all libraries in the county.

Two library surveys were completed, but responses provided little information about digital offerings. The pandemic reinforced the importance of communities’ local libraries; therefore, a comprehensive evaluation of their offerings and services should be completed. Having enough public computers and online digital training for the population brings better digital equity and literacy in the community. The county has four main libraries: Kountze Public Library, Lumberton Public Library, Alma M. Carpenter Public Library, and Silsbee Public Library.

Action 2 – Develop a strategy to support and improve local libraries’ digital resources and their online presence.

It is important to inform the community about the availability of public Wi-Fi at local libraries. Increase the libraries’ presence in the community by more frequent use of social media, electronic distribution of library surveys, development of instructional videos for upload to YouTube, and by livestreaming library events. Also, increasing the libraries’ presence in the communities helps promote digital literacy. Offering digital literacy skills in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese can attract more patrons to the libraries. The U.S. Census states more than 94% of residents speak English, but small populations in the area also speak Spanish and Vietnamese. Offering skills classes in multiple languages can help increase broadband adoption, allowing for further inclusion in the digital economy.

Action 3 – Consider a marketing strategy for building awareness of the library’s digital presence.

Work with community partners to spread the word about the library and the various ways residents can digitally interact. Develop outreach materials that reach critical groups in the community, such as families with children, senior citizens, low-income residents, Hispanic and Latino populations, Vietnamese populations, and others. Churches are an important outreach partner, as well as chambers of commerce and other philanthropic partners. Specific partners could include Kountze Chamber of Commerce, Sour Lake Chamber of Commerce, Lumberton Chamber of Commerce,



and Silsbee Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center.

Responsible Parties:

The broadband director, broadband team, and librarians can review marketing strategies to promote the libraries activities and services. Chambers, churches, and community organizations can help by marketing to their members. The public libraries in Hardin County include Kountze Public Library, Lumberton Public Library, Silsbee Public Library, Alma M. Carpenter Public Library in Sour Lake.

Timeline:

A review of libraries' services should happen within the first 3 months of this plan's acceptance.

Resources:

[The Public Library Association and AT&T team up to bring digital literacy to families](#)

[AARP joins with nonprofit to teach tech to older adults](#)

[Drive your learning](#) – a Connected Nation Initiative

[Telehealth](#) information from Connected Nation

[Public Library Association](#) Digital Learn Curriculum

[Training the trainers under NDIA](#)

Three organizations that offer both English and Spanish open-source resources online:

- Goodwill Foundation – [English](#) and [Spanish](#)
- Public Library Association - [DigitalLearn.org](#)
- Grow with [Google](#)

Goal 5: Increase broadband adoption and use in Hardin County to increase the county's digital capacity.

Broadband adoption is critical for increasing the digital capacity of a community. It is essential for empowering communities and individuals. It not only refers to a subscription to a service provider, but it also refers to the daily use of the internet. It requires basic skills and access to a personal



device that enables an individual to accomplish basic tasks. The leading barriers to broadband adoption, in areas where access is not an issue, are affordability, lack of digital skills, and lack of awareness. Therefore, it is imperative for project plans to reflect programs that can help overcome barriers to adoption.

In the household survey, about 21% of households that do not have internet stated that cost was their primary barrier. Internet fees that are above 2% of monthly income are a cost burden. The cost barrier can be further explained by the poverty rate in the county (12%).

Objective:

Increase the adoption and use of broadband and related technologies by the residents of Hardin County.

Actions:

Action 1 – Promote programs that help residents overcome the affordability barrier to broadband adoption. The county should work with community leaders and institutions to publicly promote programs and opportunities designed to reduce the cost of broadband service. This can be done by sending notices out with the water bill, posting notices in the newspaper or in monthly school newsletters, discussing programs at Commissioners' Court or city hall meetings, or advertising affordability programs at frequently visited community buildings and businesses.

Below are some programs and resources that could be promoted to residents:

- **A resource to locate affordable internet service or computers:** Using online resources, Hardin County residents can identify local and national providers who offer special, low-cost services for vulnerable populations, older adults, and low-income families with children. Such resources include [EveryoneOn](#), which helps residents locate low-cost internet services and affordable computers by ZIP code and need based on their participation in assistance programs.
- **Information about low-cost internet services offered by providers:** In Hardin County, AT&T Southwest offers the Access from AT&T program for \$10 per month or less, based on the maximum speed available at the address, with speeds up to 25Mbps. Charter (Spectrum) offers Spectrum Internet Assist for \$17.99 per month for up to 30 Mbps. *This is subject to household eligibility and service availability at a specific address.*
- **State and federal low-cost programs:** There are two critical programs that offer discounts for broadband to eligible households:
 - **Lifeline Program:** This is a government assistance program run by the Public Utility Commission of Texas that provides a discount to qualifying low-income



customers who subscribe to voice telephone service or broadband internet access service. The monthly discount for qualifying low-income customers may be up to \$12.75 (\$3.50 state discount and \$9.25 federal Lifeline discount.) depending on the services and eligibility. Lifeline service is non-transferable and is limited to one discount per household.

- **The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP):** This program is run by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to help low-income households pay for internet service and connected devices like a laptop or tablet. To find out which providers are offering this service, please click [here](#). The providers offering ACP discounts in Hardin County include some providers listed on the CN service map: AT&T Southwest, Charter (Spectrum), Sparklight, and T-Mobile.

Affordable Internet Services Available in Hardin County

Provider	Program Name	Cost and Features	Eligibility	How to Apply
AT&T	Access from AT&T	\$10/month or less based on the maximum speed available at the address, with speeds up to \$25Mbps Free installation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Households with families on Supplemental Nutritional Access Program (SNAP) • Families on the National School Lunch and Head Start Programs • Households with income at or below 135% of the federal poverty guidelines 	For more information, click here , or call (855) 220-5211 (English) or (855) 220-5225 (Spanish)
Charter (Spectrum)	Spectrum Internet Assist	\$17.99 per month No data caps, free modem, and free Internet Security Suite protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least one person in the applying household must participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the NSLP, or receive Supplemental Security Income (for applicants age 65+ only) 	For more information, click here , or call (844) 525-1574



Provider	Program Name	Cost and Features	Eligibility	How to Apply
T-Mobile	Project 10Million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free 100GB of internet per year for 5 years Free hotspot with free shipping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Medicaid Head Start Foster youth, migrant homeless, or runaway youth 	Apply here
State and Federal Governments	Lifeline	Up to \$12.95 discount for broadband service from participating providers (\$3.50 state discount and \$9.25 federal discount)	<p>At least one person in the household who receives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SNAP Housing Assistance TANF SSI National School Lunch Program <p>Households with income based at or below 150% and 135% of the federal poverty guidelines for the state and federal discounts, respectively</p>	Apply online or download the application package and send it by mail



Provider	Program Name	Cost and Features	Eligibility	How to Apply
Federal Government	Affordable Connectivity Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Up to a \$30/month discount on internet service Up to a \$75/month discount for household on qualifying tribal lands A one-time discount of up to \$100 for a laptop, tablet, or desktop computer (with a co-payment of more than \$10 but less than \$50) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An income at or below 200% or less than the federal poverty guidelines If you or your child or dependent participate in certain government assistance programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, WIC, Pell Grants, SSI, Veterans Pension, Free and Reduced Lunch Program, WIC, Medicaid, or other programs If you or your child or dependent already receives a Lifeline benefit 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Contact a participating broadband provider Apply online Print an application: English Spanish (Application Instructions)

Responsible Parties:

The director of broadband or broadband team, County Commissioners, County Judge, local chambers, churches, and providers.

Resources:

[The Affordable Connectivity Program](#) – designed to supplement the cost of internet services to households that qualify

[Lifeline Program](#) – designed to help with monthly phone and internet cost

[Ideas](#) to reduce your monthly billing

Goal 6: Compare cost of internet services for school districts in Hardin County.

Objective:

To enable digital learning in every classroom every day, the FCC recommends 1 Mbps internet service per student. In reviewing E-Rate data and internet data for Hardin County schools, it is apparent that different school districts within the county are paying substantially different rates for



internet services.

Action 1 – Review the services your school is receiving and the cost you are paying per child on www.connectk12.org. Understand your cost and the neighboring districts’ cost and compare. For example:

School district	Service per student	Cost per month	Recommended service per student
Lumberton ISD	550 kbps (kilobits per second)	\$2,968	1 Mbps (Megabit per second)
Hardin-Jefferson ISD	470 kbps	\$3,570	1 Mbps

Source: www.connectk12.org

Neither of the two school districts listed is at the recommended digital learning speed of 1 Mbps per student, but Hardin-Jefferson ISD is paying more.

Action 2 – With this information in hand, schools should negotiate with internet providers and request additional bids when contracts are up for renewal. Schools may have assets to share with a provider to help decrease the cost and increase the speeds per student.

Action 3 – Use free resources provided by TEA (Texas Education Agency) to help schools navigate the E-Rate program.

Responsible Parties:

The superintendents of each school district, along with the IT directors, and boards of trustees, need to understand E-Rate pricing and verify their school districts are receiving the best pricing. In many cases, the local Educational Service Centers (ESCs) negotiate prices on behalf of districts and can be helpful, but each district should verify it is getting the best price for its schools. In some cases, local providers may offer better discounts than E-Rate pricing.

Timeline:

Broadband options are changing rapidly, so school IT directors, superintendents, and boards of trustees should review E-Rate contracts during the renewal process.

Resources:

[Web resource](#) for schools provided by Connected Nation

[Universal Service Administrative Co.](#) E-Rate website

[Texas Education Agency](#) website