

BERRIEN COUNTY BROADBAND INTERNET TASK FORCE

[BCBIT](#)

January 8, 2026 12:30 PM

Berrien County Administration Center
Kenneth Wendzel Conference Room, and Zoom

MEETING NOTES

MEETING ATTENDEES: Berrien County Commissioner **Teri Freehling**; Berrien County Commissioner **Jim Curran**; Berrien County Commissioner **Rayonte Bell**; Berrien County Administrator **Brian Dissette**; Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC) Executive Director **K. John Egelhaaf**; Berrien County GIS Director **Erika Espeland**; Berrien County Economic Development Specialist **Kimberly Fedison**.

INDUSTRY ATTENDEES: Midwest Energy & Communication (MEC) President and CEO **Terry Rubenthaler**; Midwest Energy & Communication (MEC) Business Development Manager **Jennifer Gilliam**; DCS Technology Design (DCS) President **Chris Scharrer**; Comcast (Xfinity) Business Account Manager **Ben Miller**.

MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP ATTENDEES: New Buffalo Township Supervisor **Michelle Heit**.

- I. **UPDATE from MIDWEST ENERGY & COMMUNICATIONS (MEC): Construction Efforts: BERRIEN COUNTY.** Terry Rubenthaler, CEO of [Midwest Energy & Communications](#) (MEC), and Jennifer Gilliam, Business Development Manager at MEC, updated [BCBIT](#) on their broadband deployment progress across Berrien County for [January 2026](#). This update is included at the end of this [document](#) and posted to the [BCBIT website](#). Take-rates continue to increase in each completed zone. The winter schedule may change based on weather conditions. This is noted in the zone-by-zone matrix. Expect construction to be completed by the end of the 2nd quarter, 2026.

- II. **Update from DCS Technology Design.** Terry Rubenthaler, CEO of MEC, and Chris Sharrer, President of DCS Technology Design, provided BCBIT with an update on recent developments in BEAD¹ applications and awards, as well as fiber construction progress (for ARPA² & ROBIN³) in Berrien County.

¹ **BEAD:** Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program. BEAD is a \$42.45 billion federal grant program that aims to connect every American to high-speed internet by funding partnerships to build infrastructure. In June 2023, NTIA announced allocation amounts for all 56 states and territories.

² **ARPA:** American Rescue Plan Act. ARPA was signed into law by President Biden on March 11, 2021, the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) is a federal COVID-19 relief package focused on economic recovery. Key features include \$350 billion in direct aid to state, local, and tribal governments (SLFRF), as well as funding for public health, education, and infrastructure.

³ **ROBIN:** Realizing Opportunity with Broadband Infrastructure Networks Grant Program. ROBIN is a high-speed internet last-mile and middle-mile infrastructure competitive grant program with \$238M in project funds from the US Treasury as part of the Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund. ROBIN provides funds to

Related to the BEAD program progress, the State’s Attorney General is currently reviewing the BEAD agreement, with the official review period beginning in December 2025. While the hope is that finalization will occur before the maximum allotted time (6-months) in May 2026, it is prudent to plan for the process to take the full duration. Here’s my point: expectations for January completion are overly optimistic given the complexity and significant financial implications involved, as well as the typical back-and-forth required to finalize a government document. Please be prepared for the possibility that, by our February meeting, the agreement may still be pending due to ongoing discussions.

III. Graham Woodhouse Award. BCBIT has received the Graham Woodhouse Award. Congratulations! The following is the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission’s press release:

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC) presented the 2025 Graham Woodhouse Intergovernmental Effort award at its Board meeting held on December 16, 2025, for the Berrien County Broadband Project. The award is presented annually for projects that exemplify cooperation between and among governments, non-profits, and private entities. It was established to recognize and reward the partners who execute complex, regional problem-solving that optimizes the use of limited resources.

The partners involved were deemed deserving for their resourcefulness, dedication, and persistence. The 2025 Graham Woodhouse award was given to the seven project partners (organizations and individuals), while also acknowledging the partnership’s collaborative work with 22 Berrien townships and local units of government.

At the center of the project was the Berrien County Broadband Internet Task Force (BCBIT). The Task Force built an impressive partnership that spans local governments, broadband experts, non-profit organizations, and internet service providers. A major turning point occurred when the state issued its Realizing Opportunity with Broadband Infrastructure Networks (ROBIN) funding opportunity. At that point, BCBIT’s efforts to extensively map the county’s existing internet infrastructure made it possible to know precisely which households were unserved and underserved. The county partnered with Midwest Energy and Communications on a successful, \$56.4 million application to expand service with high-speed, future-proof, fiber optic infrastructure.

Construction of the fiber network began in 2023 and is slated for completion (ahead of schedule) in the second quarter of 2026. The result will provide service to 9,221 homes where high-speed internet



internet service providers and public-private partnerships for the expansion of broadband infrastructure to unserved areas

was previously unavailable. BCBIT continues its work to fulfill its objective to make broadband internet available to every household in Berrien County.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission is the regional planning agency for Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties. It is one of fourteen regional planning agencies in the state of Michigan. The SWMPC is a resource to local municipalities and the counties, bringing expertise in planning for the future to create actionable plans and to secure funding to maintain and build infrastructure, spur economic development, and preserve natural resources.

For more information, please contact John Egelhaaf, Executive Director at egelhaafj@swmpc.org

IV. **NEXT MEETING, Thursday, February 5, 2026, at 12:30 PM.** The [BCBIT webpage](#) has been updated.

V. **MISCELLANEOUS.** Camp Madron Lake Road. The Camp Madron Lake Road subdivision in Buchanan Charter Township would like MEC to extend fiber to its 45 parcels while MEC is installing fiber nearby. All 45 parcel owners must quickly agree to the extension, as MEC will soon complete its fiber work in Buchanan Charter Township. There are service drops MEC may or may not be able to use, as Michiana Supernet ran fiber to an unlicensed tower. **It needs to be noted that Terry Rubenthaler, MEC CEO, stated: at the beginning of ARPA & ROBIN, the residents of this Camp Madrin Lake Road subdivision REFUSED MEC from entering their subdivision.**

This email is from Chris Scharrer to a Camp Madron Lake Road resident regarding the effort to extend MEC fiber internet service to the 45 parcels in the [area](#). For the knowledge of BCBIT, Camp Madron Lake Road residents are currently served by [Michiana Supernet](#). As a reminder, funding programs such as ARPA, ROBIN, and BEAD will not reimburse parcels that are already served; only unserved or underserved parcels are eligible. Submitting a served parcel for reimbursement will result in the expense being deemed ineligible.

Hi Susan,

I wanted to get back with you about the Broadband situation for Camp Madron. Thank you for the speed tests, those will be invaluable for my discussion with the State of Michigan's High-Speed Internet Office (MiHI) and the federal agency, NTIA, if we get to that point. But I want to make sure you understand where we are today.

I think we talked about hoping to see some finality with the MiHI BEAD process by early 2026. Unfortunately, we have still not seen any progress. BEAD has been delayed a few times now, so this is no surprise.

I have, however, looked at the tentative awards and current maps (all still subject to change) and want to make sure you understand that what we are waiting on with BEAD, is not offering any proposed funding yet for Camp Madron. There was a single location in your development that was qualified for BEAD funding but has since been removed from the map. Not sure who removed it, or why it was removed, but it was 1) only a single location, and 2) would likely have been refused by any service

provider anyway, since it was only one location. My next course of action relative to BEAD is to wait for the current round to be awarded and sub-recipient agreements completed between the ISPs and MiHI. That was what we were hoping to see early this month, but my sources tell me that the agreements are still under legal review by the state and federal agencies involved. If they complete that in the next month or two, it will still take months to get them executed. Once that is complete, I will then be able to approach MiHI and start talking about these gaps that remain around the county and make a case for another round of funding. The speed tests will help Camp Mardon tremendously, although the talks with MiHI and NTIA will be contingent upon MiHI and the NTIA being open to such requests. They have expressed optimism regarding my request, but I cannot give any guarantees still at this point.

As far as the MEC proposal goes, I would first ask how many residents in Camp Madron have expressed an interest? This is my understanding of what has been proposed:

If you have guaranteed commitments:

- *100% to 91% installation is \$100 each*
- *90% to 71% installation is \$500 each*
- *70% to 51% installation is \$1000 each*

Nothing will be built if less than 23 (50%) residents commit.

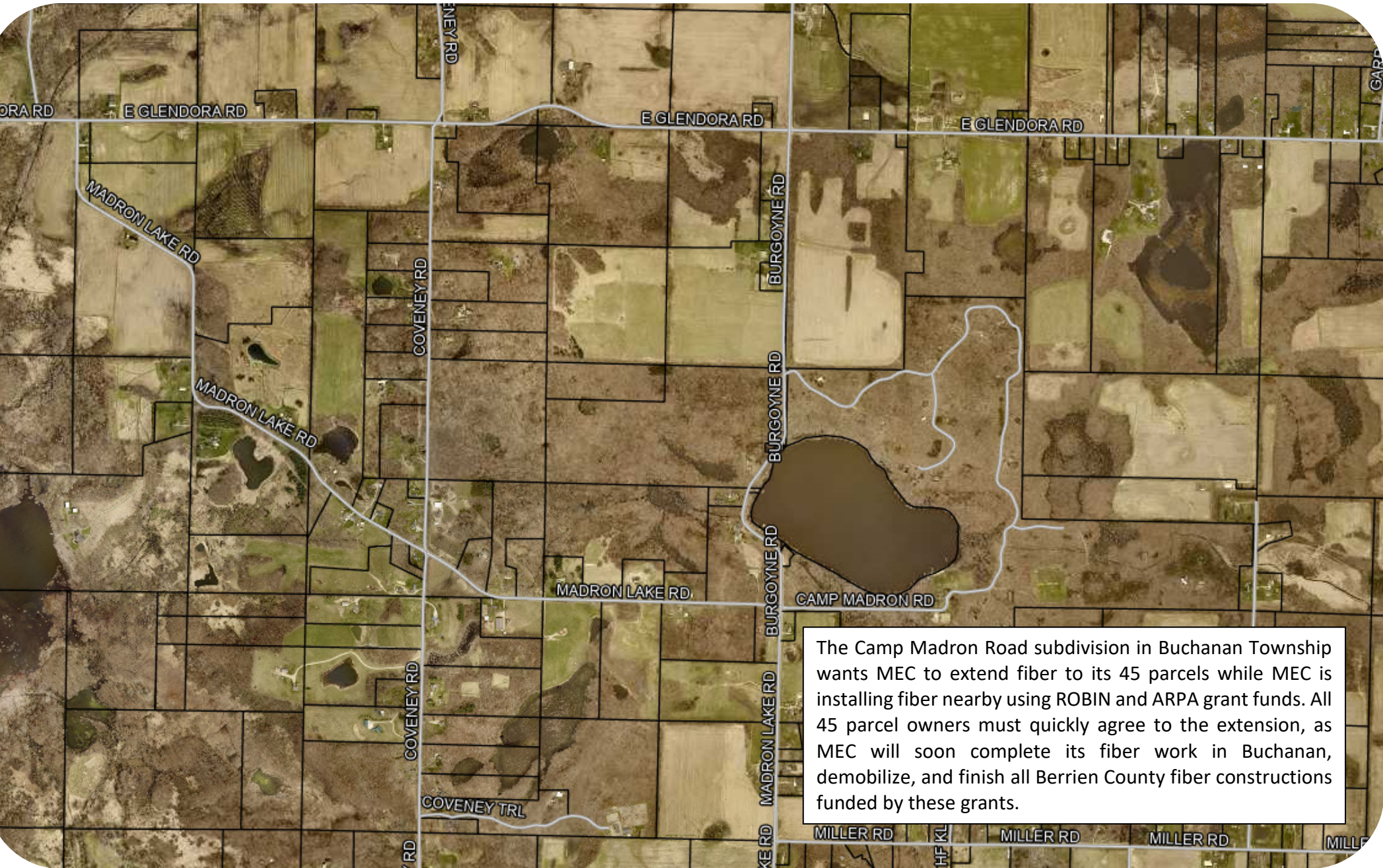
With this in mind, even if we wait for BEAD, MEC (or any other ISP that may pursue it) would be looking for typical individual installation costs of \$100 (or more). Service fees after that would be the same regardless of whether the ISP was funded by BEAD or had a direct agreement with the Camp. But I understand the proposal above is based on the number of residents willing to guarantee a commitment. If you have 91% or more of the residents willing to sign up, MEC is offering a program that is comparable in costs to any of the Grant programs would be.

If at least 42 homes commit, the individual costs to homeowners would be comparable to what they could expect if we waited for BEAD, which may be another year or two (or more). If it is less than 42, then obviously the shared costs would have to escalate. But knowing what the actual costs would be for MEC to build around the lake, I was surprised to see this proposal. This is an excellent opportunity for Camp Madron to get a very good long-term solution in place soon, at a cost that is likely not going to improve if we wait for BEAD. I do not know what the guaranteed commitment timeframe is that MEC requires, but I do know they are very competitive with their service offerings, which are far better than what the attached speed tests show. It is likely the best opportunity we have to get the highest quality and most reliable broadband services for the residents. I cannot make any guarantees for time or costs if we choose to wait for a possible second round for BEAD. And I don't believe we have any other funding sources in the works currently. That could change over the next year or so, but all focus is on BEAD for now.

I hope this helps your evaluation. Please let me know what additional questions you may have

Thanks

Chris Scharrer B (616) 676 6994 | C (734) 604 8000 www.dcstechnology.com



The Camp Madron Road subdivision in Buchanan Township wants MEC to extend fiber to its 45 parcels while MEC is installing fiber nearby using ROBIN and ARPA grant funds. All 45 parcel owners must quickly agree to the extension, as MEC will soon complete its fiber work in Buchanan, demobilize, and finish all Berrien County fiber constructions funded by these grants.

MEC FIBER CONSTRUCTION SCHEDULE - JANUARY 2026- 74% COMPLETE!

381.6 out of 516.6 FIBER MILES ARE COMPLETE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

MEC ZONE NAME	MUNICIPALITY	MEC FIBER MILES	PROJECT FUNDING	CONSTRUCTION START DATE	STATUS	CONNECTION START DATE	NOTES: Design Work Complete on ALL Zones!	SUBSCRIPTION TAKE-RATE
BERTRAND*	Bertrand, Buchanan, & Niles Townships	54.7	ROBIN	COMPLETE	COMPLETE	Connecting Customers	COMPLETE! Connecting Customers! Waiting for AEP to complete work on Buffalo Road.	23%
GALIEN	Village of Galien, Bertrand, Galien, Three Oaks, & Weesaw Townships	48.2	ROBIN	COMPLETE	COMPLETE	Connecting Customers	COMPLETE! Connecting Customers!	28%
BARODA	Baroda, Lake, Lincoln, Royalton, & Weesaw Townships	69	ROBIN	COMPLETE	COMPLETE	Connecting Customers	COMPLETE! Connecting Customers!	40%
EAU CLAIRE B**	Village of Eau Claire, Berrien, Buchanan, Niles, Pipestone & Sodus Townships	61.5	ROBIN	COMPLETE	COMPLETE	Connecting Customers	COMPLETE! Connecting Customers! Waiting on AEP to complete work on White Oaks Ridge.	20%
WEESAW	Chikaming, Galien, Three Oaks, & Weesaw Townships	51.2	ROBIN	COMPLETE	COMPLETE	Connecting Customers	COMPLETE! Connecting Customers!	22%
BRANDYWINE***	Niles Charter Township	13	RDOF & ROBIN	COMPLETE	COMPLETE	Connecting Customers	COMPLETE! Connecting Customers!	6%
BUCHANAN	Buchanan & Weesaw Townships	54.2	ROBIN	COMPLETE	COMPLETE	Connecting Customers	COMPLETE! Connecting Customers!	29%
NORTH KEELER	Keeler, Bainbridge, Hartford, & Watervliet Townships	29.7	RDOF & ROBIN	COMPLETE	COMPLETE	Connecting Customers	COMPLETE! Connecting Customers!	14%
THREE OAKS	Chikaming, Galien, Three Oaks, & New Buffalo Townships	49.2	ROBIN	STARTING! Q4 - 2025	95% COMPLETE!	Q1-2026	CONSTRUCTION STARTING! Both Zone Fiber Construction and Connections to Customers are currently on schedule.95% complete!	1% (JUST STARTED SIGN-UP)
HAGAR	Benton, Coloma & Hagar Townships	36	RDOF & ROBIN	Q4-2025	CONSTRUCTION STARTED!	Q1-2026	CONSTRUCTION STARTED. ON SCHEDULE!	
COLOMA	Coloma, Covert & Hagar Townships	15.2	ROBIN	Q1-2026	PENDING	Q1-2026	PENDING. START Q-1 2026	
SOUTH COVERT	Coloma, Covert & Watervliet Townships	5	ROBIN	Q2-2026****	PENDING	Q2-2026	PENDING	
TWELVE CORNERS	Benton, Coloma & Hagar Townships	12.3	ROBIN	Q2-2026****	PENDING	Q2-2026	PENDING	
NORTH HARTFORD	Hartford & Watervliet Townships	17.3	ROBIN	Q2-2026****	PENDING	Q2-2026	PENDING	

TOTAL MEC FIBER MILES	516.5	<i>As of January 8, 2026</i>
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COMPLETED MILES	381.6	74%
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*BERTRAND - Waiting on AEP to complete work on Buffalo Road

** EAU CLAIRE B - Waiting on AEP to complete work on White Oaks Ridge

***BRANDYWINE - Waiting on AEP to complete work on Bond Street

****Potential to move to start in Q1 - depending on our winter weather!



Berrien County Broadband Project wins award from Southwest Michigan Planning Commission

December 18, 2025 - The Berrien County Broadband Project, an effort by the county and several partners to expand the availability of broadband internet in the community, is this year's recipient of the Graham Woodhouse Intergovernmental Effort Award from the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

Each year the award goes out to Southwest Michigan projects that demonstrate exemplary cooperation between local governments, non-profits, and private entities.

Speaking to the Berrien County Board of Commissioners Thursday, the planning commission's John Egelhaaf said Berrien County spearheaded an effort to identify precisely where broadband was lacking in the community and then secured funding to fill the gaps.

"And look at the numbers, it's really unbelievable," Egelhaaf said "5,700-plus unserved households will then be served. So we're talking about households with no viable internet or speeds below 25/3, which is really, really pokey slow if that. And then the 3,500 underserved households."

Egelhaaf said Midwest Energy and Communications became the county's partner in building all of that fiber out, securing more than \$20 million from the state's ROBIN grant program with financial support from affected counties and townships. He added the project looked at all areas of the county that lacked broadband.

"This project was never about the head of the class among townships and villages. We knew there were going to be the Oronoko Townships that were way ahead of the curve and just pushing, pushing, pushing. It wasn't as much about them as it was about those that were deeply under-resourced, those that didn't have the skill sets or even sort of the recognition that broadband was a big deal and needed to be solved."

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission handed out awards to several partners in the broadband effort, including members of the county broadband committee, the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber, MEC, and Merit Network, Incorporated.

Egelhaaf called the entire broadband project "extraordinary work."

<https://bloxstj.paxtonmedia.com/tncms/asset/editorial/6f961b87-6daf-4a32-a001-48e123664514/>

Berrien County

Berrien County Broadband Internet Task Force receives award

By JULIE SWIDWA HP Correspondent

Dec 20, 2025



ST. JOSEPH — In the summer of 2018, then-County Commissioner Ezra Scott met a mother at the Berrien County Youth Fair whose daughter had received a failing grade on a school assignment.

“This was because the family did not have internet access, which was needed to complete the assignment,” Scott said earlier this week. “That’s unacceptable.”

So, Scott had a conversation with fellow Berrien County Commissioner Teri Freehling and the two went to Washington D.C. to meet with National Telecommunications & Information Administration staff to lobby for new maps to be drawn related to internet accessibility in Berrien County.

The Berrien County Broadband Internet Taskforce (BCBIT) was formally created in 2019.

In 2021, BCBIT partnered with Merit Network to complete an ambitious, county-wide household survey as a counterpoint to existing Federal Communications Commission broadband mapping.

Next, Berrien County put out a request for proposals for a provider to fill the gaps in broadband infrastructure and delivery service, and Midwest Energy & Communications (MEC) won the bid.

Subsequently, MEC submitted a \$56.4 million ROBIN (Realizing Opportunity with Broadband Infrastructure Networks) grant application for expanded service.

Since the start, most of the 11,940 households in Berrien County that had been identified as being unserved or underserved now have access to high-speed internet.

Some 1,600 remain to be served, and Freehling, who chairs BCBIT, said Friday she is awaiting word on future grant funding and is confident the remaining households will be taken care of.

At Thursday's meeting of the Berrien County board, BCBIT and its partners were presented the Graham Woodhouse Intergovernmental Effort Award for their work on the Berrien County Broadband Project.

The award, named in honor of former Dowagiac Mayor Graham Woodhouse, is presented annually by the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission for projects that demonstrate exemplary cooperation between local governments, nonprofit organizations and private entities.

The award was presented by SWMPC Executive Director John Egelhaaf, who said the project partners have worked extensively to establish high-speed internet connectivity to unserved and underserved regions of Berrien County.

"Access to the internet has become vital for many aspects of everyday life in the 21st century," Egelhaaf said. "Improving the availability of high-speed internet can have vastly positive impacts in our community, improving education, telemedicine, public safety, agriculture, economic development and more."

Funding so far for the project have come in the way of grants from American Rescue Plan Act money and a ROBIN state grant. Freehling said Berrien County, through the Michigan Office for Internet Infrastructure, has applied for a share of \$1.4 billion available for Michigan in the way of Broadband Equity Accessibility Deployment (BEAD) grant program.

“We are not sure and are awaiting results, but I am told it looks promising,” Freehling said Friday.

Berrien County Broadband Partners present to receive the Graham Woodhouse award Thursday included:

Ben Fineman from National Telecommunications & Information Administration.

Berrien County Administrator Brian Dissette, Commissioner Teri Sue Freehling, Commissioner Jim Curran, and Kim Fedison, economic development specialist from Berrien County.

Terry Ruhenthaler from Midwest Energy & Communications.

Charlotte Bewersdorff from Merit Network.

Arthur Havlicek from the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber.

Scott also was present for the celebration, held during Thursday’s Berrien County Board’s Committee of the Whole meeting.

Julie Swidwa