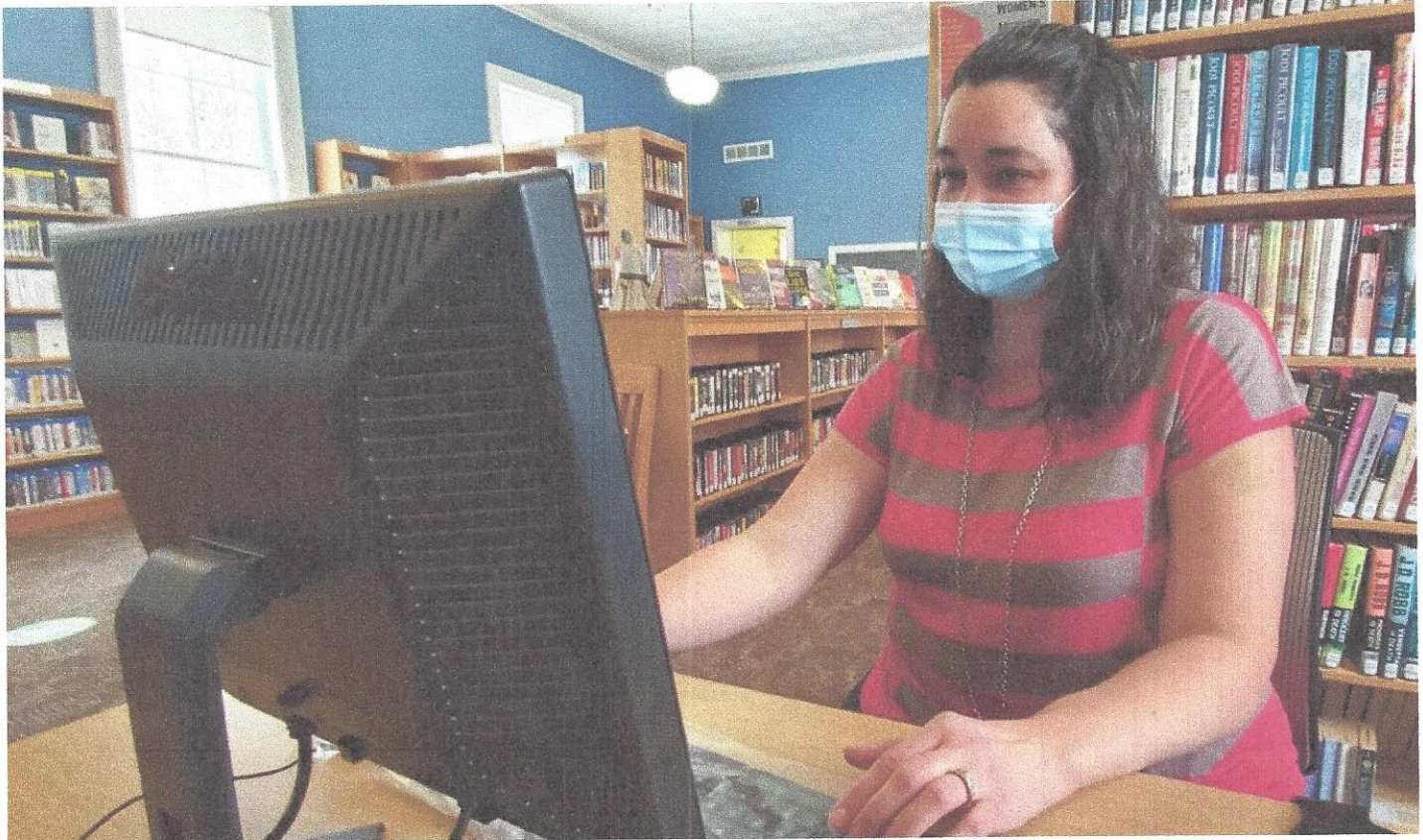


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FEATURED

## Bridging the digital divide: Broadband boost coming for northern Macomb County

By Gina Joseph [gjoseph@medianewsgroup.com](mailto:gjoseph@medianewsgroup.com); @ginaljoseph on Twitter  
Feb 1, 2021



Mary Barnes, assistant librarian in Ray Township, will be among the people teaching seniors and those who have been with reliable technology access how to connect in a digital world. DAVID ANGELL - FOR THE MACOMB DAILY

Macomb County's rural communities will soon get a boost in gigabit-speeds.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Rural Digital Opportunity Fund announced its recent efforts to ensure greater access to broadband and high-speed internet will include nearly \$363 million in federal funding for Michigan over the next 10 years.





"It's absolutely wonderful," said Mary Barnes, an assistant librarian in Ray Township, which is among the rural communities that are likely to benefit from the expansion. "I can't imagine living the world we live in now, and not having it."

Claire Lopiccolo concurred.

"I think the high-speed internet is crucial," said Lopiccolo, Romeo District Library Graubner branch library director. "We were open for most of the summer and fall but have been closed since November because of the coronavirus pandemic. I know we have a lot of residents, especially in Bruce Township who don't have access to the internet."

Once libraries closed, they were cut off, and that really became a problem when children and young adults returned to school and college.

"We've had wifi available from the parking lot during the pandemic, so students working on their college projects would have access to the internet," Lopiccolo said.

Throughout the pandemic, many libraries have made it possible for residents to check out wifi hotspots, which provide internet access wherever needed, expanding service beyond their walls. The hotspots allow those without internet to check it out from the library. It can be used to access and connect wireless enabled devices such as laptops, smartphones or tablets. They are portable and are available to borrow for 14 days and can carry a \$1 a day late fee if not returned on time. Devices more than 24 hours late are sometimes deactivated.

And it is not just students who have had to rely on libraries for the internet. Many seniors and working adults require high-speed internet for everything from filling out medical forms and financial statements to communication outside the home.

Today, approximately 1,243,339 Michigan households do not have a permanent fixed broadband connection at home. Financial experts believe such deficiencies can result in \$1.8 to \$2.7 billion in potential economic benefit left unrealized, not to mention the problems it creates for families who have students that need access for learning opportunities.

"The Internet access divide is real and must be addressed to provide opportunity for all Michiganders to thrive," Michigan Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist II said in a news release. Gilchrist, who is helping to lead the Connected Michigan Task Force amidst the ongoing pandemic, said



strengthening Michigan's infrastructure remains a key component for the state's economic recovery, and broadband and high-speed internet are as foundational to our infrastructure as strong roads and bridges.

"Over the coming years, these broadband projects will have a major impact in making sure Michigan is a home of opportunity for all," he said.

There are nearly 250,000 locations to have expanded access to broadband, including 2,300 in Macomb County.

"We're real excited about expanding our services to Michigan," said Garrett Wiseman, CEO for Mercury Broadband, the Kansas City, Mo. based company that will be doing some of the work. "We're looking forward to working collaboratively with the communities."

The work being done will cover everything from residential to commercial properties, including homes and churches, businesses and schools.

Besides just having access to the internet, users will also benefit from technology improvements.

"The speeds will be a lot faster, and the internet will be more reliable," Wiseman said. "The networks that are built today are much more robust and able to serve a lot more people."

The improvements will also broaden the opportunities for those in Macomb County -- many of whom reside in it rural areas -- to participate in telehealth, virtual learning, telework, civic engagement and many other activities that internet users have access to every day.

This federal funding also builds on \$12.7 million in Connecting Michigan Communities (CMIC) grants that have been given through the Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget announced by the Whitmer administration this past October. Among those given grant recipients was Armada Township, which received \$3.3 million for a project that will cost approximately \$3.4 million.

"We are very grateful for this opportunity and grant," said Armada Township Supervisor John Paterak. "It's not like getting the first television on the block. High-speed internet is a necessity not a luxury, and the whole COVID situation really shined a light on that. It's a necessity for homes and businesses. It's access to communications and education."





It is a necessity for the world that we live in," added Paterak, who believes that in the past bringing high-speed internet to rural areas where everyone lives on farms and acreages, has made it too costly for companies to consider. After all, in a suburban area where houses are closer together you'll have twice as many customers as you would installing cable to farmers who are living between 10 and 20 miles apart.

But technology has improved, and it has become more cost effective.

"This is a huge step forward for us to bring Comcast cable to the community," said Paterak, who has a subcommittee working diligently to come up with a plan of use for its grant, which will provide high-speed internet to 450 homeowners. "Once they get a foothold, we're hoping that they will be encouraged to add more."

All projects have committed to closing the internet access divide and provide digital literacy training materials to residents and businesses in their proposed service area, and work with local CAIs and foundations to host events to promote e-learning, job, and workforce training.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has made access to broadband more imperative than ever and building and strengthening broadband infrastructure throughout Michigan will be a driver of economic recovery efforts statewide," said Amanda Bright McClanahan, CEO of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. "The benefits of having access to the internet can have a tremendous access on a person's future success and our state's overall economic prosperity, making it absolutely vital that we get to work with our public service and private sector partners to create more equitable access to broadband infrastructure statewide."

Wiseman said any details regarding when the work will be started and completed is still being worked out.

For more information, visit [michiganbusiness.org/broadband](http://michiganbusiness.org/broadband).

## Ready, set, go!

Everyone will benefit from improved internet services in rural Macomb County, and the Ray Township Public Library is going to make sure they're prepared for it.



The library was recently selected as one of 200 libraries to participate in Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries, an American Library Association (ALA) initiative that helps library workers better serve their small and rural communities.

The competitive award comes with a \$3,000 grant that will help the library have conversations on connecting to a digital world.

“We are grateful for this opportunity. Our goal is to bring digital literacy and confidence to our community,” said Mary Barnes, Ray Township library assistant noting that Ray Township seniors will be their primary target.

Barnes said the township sent out a survey to residents, and rather than filling it out online at home, many seniors – who really should be staying home because of the pandemic -- were showing up at the library. “Most of them were not sure how to get on the internet or did not have access to it at home,” Barnes said.

As part of the grant, staff will take an online course in how to lead conversations, a skill vital to library work today. Staff will then play host and/or have a Zoom conversation with residents about technology and use the grant funds to provide hot spots and iPads for circulation, along with classes.

More than 300 libraries applied for the grant, according to ALA.

Since 2014, ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities initiative has re-imagined the role libraries play in supporting communities. Libraries of all types have utilized free dialogue and deliberation training and resources to lead community and campus forums; take part in anti-violence activities; provide a space for residents to come together and discuss challenging topics; and have productive conversations with civic leaders, library trustees and staff.

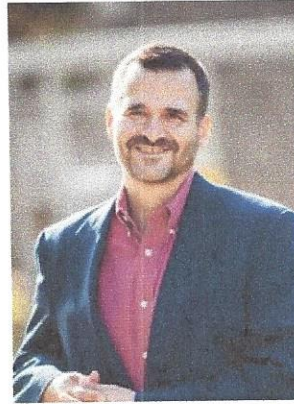
If you are interested in getting involved or taking part in the conversation, contact Mary Barnes at [mary@raylibrary.org](mailto:mary@raylibrary.org)

For more information, visit [raylibrary.org](http://raylibrary.org)

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