

Digital inclusion may be on the way in Morrow County

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

Businesses and local government officials are lining up behind a push to improve internet access in Morrow County.

Aaron Moss, fellow with Lead for America and AmeriCorps, said better digital inclusion — ability of individuals and groups to access and use information and communication technologies — is a need he is working to help fulfill in the county.

“Our primary goal is to build out infrastructure to the unincorporated, most remote areas and homes in the county,” he said.

Moss, who said he has been with Lead for America since July, lives in Heppner.

“I am stationed at the Morrow County Commissioners Office and will be working closely with the county government to convene a broadband action team of stakeholders and partners throughout the community,” he stated in an email to The Hermiston Herald. He said he is working on “expanding broadband access and digital skills as well as improving the affordability of internet services within the county.”

The Tillamook Creamery Association in partnership with Land O’Lakes is sponsoring the work, Moss said, and has assistance from government officials.

At the height of coronavirus quarantines that closed schools, some students in Morrow County had a difficult time learning from home because of spotty internet connections. Similar problems existed for people who were trying to connect with their doctors. Moss explained the importance of internet access in education, health care and work life, “with rural communities facing unique barriers to connectivity.” Parts of Morrow County lack reliable internet connection, he explained, and some parts have no connection.

This is a problem, Moss stated, because of the “uncertainty of COVID-19 variants and the possibility of a future date when people once again are pressed to depend on the internet for school, medical services and more.”

Angie Hanson, a grandmother of two boys, was among the people who noticed the problems resulting from unreliable internet access. Local children were not able to attend online school from their homes, so she organized a home school in the Gilliam and Bisbee Building in Heppner. There, around a dozen local children, including her grandsons, could connect with classes online.

These students, Hanson said, would work on their online classes from 7:30 a.m. to noon on school days. A former educational assistant, she would help them.

“I couldn’t see these kids slip through the cracks,” she said.

All of these children were neighbors or family members with one another, she explained, so they already were in close contact with one another and their communal schooling was not increasing their chance of coronavirus exposure. Not everyone, then, was able to be part of Hanson’s solution to the connection problem.

Moss credited County Commissioner Melissa Lindsay for playing a major role in supporting digital inclusion and understanding the troubles. Lindsay acknowledged the inability

for students to connect virtually to their classes.

“A lot of kids were learning from cars in a parking lot,” she said.

Others, such as Hanson’s class, were meeting together with adult leadership, she said. Such students would have been better served if they had access to reliable internet, as enjoyed in other cities, she said.

Lindsay also said she heard from elderly people who were leery of going to in-person doctors. Virtual appointments could have helped them, she said, but they skipped appointments because, in addition to not wanting to visit a doc-



Aaron Moss/Contributed Photo

At a broadband town hall Nov. 10, 2021, in Heppner, people discuss the need for better internet. Aaron Moss, center, introduces his work on expanding broadband access.

tor face-to-face, they could not connect to the internet. Therefore, they went without medical care, the commissioner said.

This is why, Lindsay said, the county started a broadband task force that included the Morrow School District superintendent and other experts and affected local individuals.

Moss said a “backorder of fiber” is causing delays, but he anticipates work to start early next year with the laying of new line.

Eventually, he said, he will be looking for volunteers to help with this project, but for now he and others will be working with

local chambers of commerce, electric cooperatives, internet service providers and city governments to create new infrastructure.

He added that another part of the plan involves raising awareness of the emergency broadband benefit.

“There are a lot of affordability programs out there that currently are unknown by people in the county,” he said.

Also, he said, he anticipates public classes to educate people on working from home and seeing doctors online. These efforts, however, are likely to happen after infrastructure is underway.

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