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# Eric Boyette, DIT Secretary Invites Counties to Partner on Expanding Broadband, Cybersecurity

By Lacy Pate, NCACC Public Relations Manager



North Carolina Department of Information Technology Secretary and Chief Information Officer Eric Boyette (left) talks with NCACC Executive Director Kevin Leonard about initiatives DIT is undertaking to address internet coverage gaps throughout the state. A video of their conversation will soon be available at [www.ncacc.org/videos](http://www.ncacc.org/videos).

**This year, counties voted to make broadband expansion NCACC's top legislative priority. The North Carolina Department of Information Technology (DIT) is working on several fronts to close gaps in internet coverage throughout the state and is a key partner for counties.** Eric Boyette, DIT Secretary and Chief Information Officer met with Kevin Leonard, NCACC Executive Director to discuss his agency's work on two major issues for counties – broadband deployment, and cybersecurity. He shared his insights on recent legislative developments, and described how his agency can help counties enhance their digital posture.

During the 2019 Long Session of the NC General Assembly, counties advocated at the state legislature for clear authority to build digital infrastructure and lease it to private providers as a public-private partnership. To this end, NCACC helped develop legislation, the FIBER NC Act, H431, which was introduced in the House. Although nothing in the bill would allow local governments to provide internet service, the telecommunications industry has been reluctant to support the concept. Kevin Leonard discussed the bill's progress with Secretary Boyette, noting, "Counties don't want to be in the business of providing service. Through FIBER NC, we are seeking the ability to have counties provide infrastructure, not the service," said Leonard.

Secretary Boyette responded, "Allowing counties to be the asset holder is a great way to move forward. Other states don't exclusively rely on providers. Counties have assets and can create new ones. I think it's a great idea," Boyette

said of the FIBER NC Act. While the bill is still pending, Boyette advised counties to talk to his technical teams at the Broadband Infrastructure Office (BIO). "Our teams can help counties assess what they currently have, [whether it be water towers or other assets], and we can help guide you," he said.

Boyette explained that North Carolina is one of few states that have a BIO. The office is staffed with a small, committed team with extensive experience in telecommunications. The BIO has developed a community broadband planning playbook to help counties identify broadband needs, available assets, strengths and weaknesses, establish goals, and create and implement policies that will help expand broadband access in the community. The playbook is available at [www.ncbroadband.gov/playbook](http://www.ncbroadband.gov/playbook).

The BIO works hand in hand with counties and has technical teams that can assist with surveys and help counties prepare for grants. BIO also recently partnered with the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and received a \$250,000 grant to hire a digital librarian and develop a literacy toolkit for local librarians. The toolkit includes mobile internet hotspots, known as MiFi to allow students in Robeson County to access digital materials from their school library. "We





want to expand the program and are looking to fund additional libraries,” said Boyette. The grant includes funding for hotspots to be expanded into 14 counties Tier One counties.

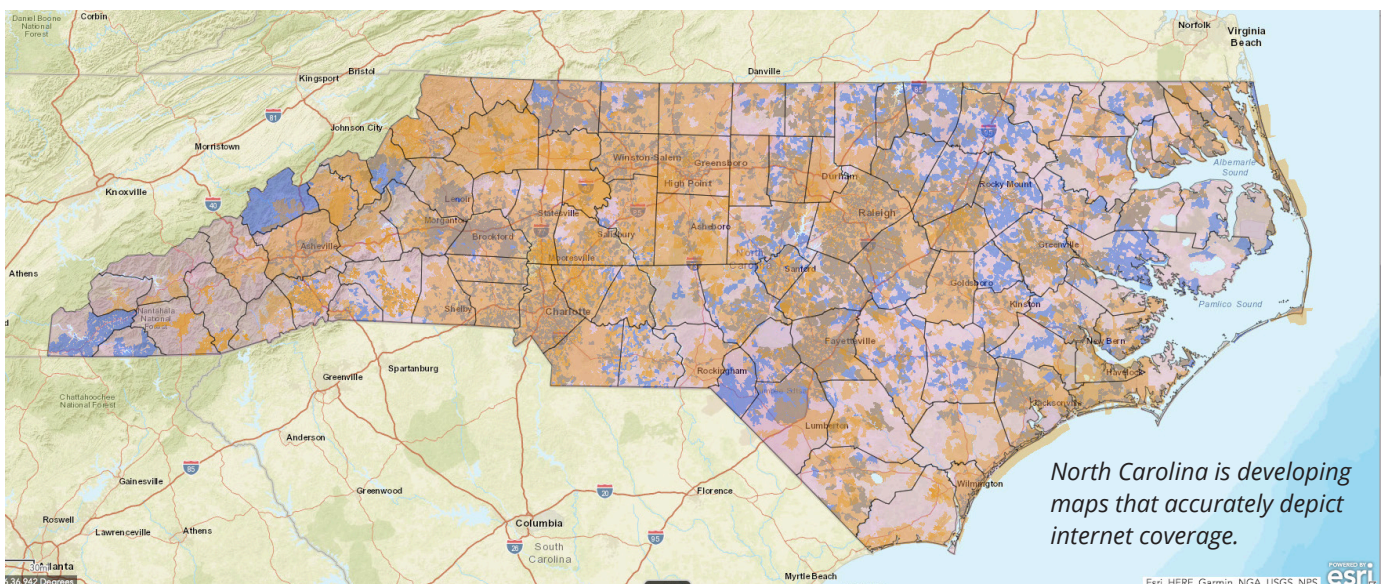
Additionally, the BIO administers a newly established program, the Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology, or “GREAT” grant program. The GREAT grant program provides matching grants to internet service providers and electric membership cooperatives that compete for funding to lower financial barriers that prevent high speed internet service expansion in Tier 1 counties. This May, internet service providers in 19 rural counties received \$10 million in GREAT grant funding.

Secretary Boyette described the new program. “The establishment of the GREAT grants is a big development. Since the program was created we have done a lot of discovery. We’ve gotten a lot of feedback, established an appeals

process, and we’re happy with the results. So far, we already have 9 or 10 contracts signed. The program allows industry partners to work with Tier one counties and we’re hoping to expand that to Tier two. We’re covering 19 counties with \$10 million for a mix of fixed wireless, and wired solutions for the last mile.”

Boyette also discussed new legislation, signed into law this year, to remove certain restrictions on electric membership corporations and their subsidiaries that have prevented them from seeking federal grant funds for telecommunications and broadband services. “It [the new law] allows co-ops to apply for loans and grants to bring in more funding to work with counties and leverage partnerships. This is part of a larger solution to help counties work with telecom. There is not one answer and we have to approach this issue looking at all the tools we have,” he explained.

As part of the state’s strategy to



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improve internet access, the BIO is undertaking a project to improve information about where internet coverage gaps exist. North Carolina is developing its own maps because the maps used by the federal government are flawed. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) collects data on coverage areas, but it’s not accurate. If one home within a census block has internet service, the FCC considers the entire block as having coverage.

“A lot of residents will call and say, ‘my neighbor has service, but I do not. How do I get service?’ You may have people in a housing development where 23 out of 25 are served. How do we get service to those people? That is what we’re trying to accomplish. We need to identify the gaps, so our broadband team built a mapping tool to ask citizens to enter their actual data and give us your speed. We even have a speed test button to make it really easy,” said Boyette.

Getting feedback from homes and businesses about the ability to access internet service and the quality of the service will help the state develop strategic plans for improving connectivity. Counties are encouraged to spread the word to residents about the importance of participating in the survey, which is available at [www.ncbroadband.gov/map](http://www.ncbroadband.gov/map).

Guilford County Health Department Director Merle Green highlighted the importance of knowing where internet service coverage gaps exist. Within the last four years, Guilford County began an ambitious process to implement the use of telemedicine in schools to ensure

students throughout the county have access to a school nurse. The initiative saves time and money by eliminating travel from school to school to treat students. The county also has future plans to offer telemedicine in a clinical setting for pregnant women and for other patients.

Greene was surprised to learn about internet gaps in certain areas of the county, noting “high speed internet access differs. Some areas lack access and a lot of people will be surprised,” she said. The revelation about lack of access didn’t stop telehealth implementation, but it required some adjustments in planning. “Create a plan and keep enough flexibility in the plan,” Greene advised.

“Logistics can’t be minimized. Layer on top of that the need for security, and equipment to get past the firewall, but it’s all worth it. Telemedicine has advantages in a lot of ways, even in areas that have an abundance of medical personnel, because patients need to take leave from work to visit a doctor. Even in the most efficient systems, a doctor appointment takes the better part of four hours when you factor in transportation and wait times. Telemedicine is ideal for a basic medical assessment and treatment of minor issues. It can save a lot of time and money for everyone,” said Greene.

Secretary Boyette also commented on the benefits of using telemedicine. “In some areas of the state, the closest hospital is one or two hours away, so we’re looking to connect those dots through the broadband task force, of which the Department of Health and

Human Services is a member. The more broadband coverage we have, the more health resources we can offer. I think it's [telemedicine] a necessity. It [telemedicine] allows our citizen to have more choices and resources," Secretary Boyette stated. DIT has partnered with the DHHS Office of Rural Health and its telemedicine team to map doctor and broadband deserts. As co-recipients of an Appalachian Regional Commission grant the agencies will work together to plan telemedicine services in 20 western counties.

Inevitably, as more counties become connected, security will need to be a top priority to keep pace with evolving threats in cyberspace. Counties are targeted regularly by malicious cyber actors, and DIT is eager to partner with

counties to improve information sharing and offer consultative assistance. As of writing this article, legislators are in the final stages of negotiating a final version of House Bill 217, which includes a provision of interest to counties. It requires local governments to report to DIT within 24 hours any technology security breaches that are confirmed by forensics.

"Cyber is a statewide effort, not an individual effort and we want to partner with counties to make sure that if we see a particular variant from ransomware, we can understand it and help you protect yourself. Information sharing is so important and trust is key. It's not big brother coming in to tell you what you did wrong. We have some great resources – sensors that detect bad traffic, MOUs





with the National Guard, that allow us to have them on site within 48 hours, and a Fusion center that works with DPS and counties when they have a problem. We can help. I'm always there, and I'd love counties to contact me or Maria Thompson, our Chief Risk Officer," explained Boyette.

NCACC Risk Management Pools are sponsoring a related workshop at the NCACC 2019 Annual Conference on Friday August 23 from 1:30 – 2:45. It will feature representatives from counties that recently experienced a cyber-incident. They will discuss what they learned and things counties should consider to better protect against cyber threats. The panel will also include a representative from CIS and Maria

Thompson, Chief Risk Officer for the North Carolina Department of Information Technology's Enterprise Security and Risk Management Office, who will discuss cybersecurity preparedness. ■



## Look Who Found Albert Coates!

Congratulations to Katie S. "Kay" Cashion, Guilford County Commissioner. She was the first to find Albert Coates in the Spring 2019 issue of *CountyQuarterly*. Commissioner Cashion has a long record of public and civic service, dating back to 1957. Among her many accomplishments, she was recently honored by NACo and Americans for the Arts with the Public Leadership in the Arts Award for County Arts Leadership. During her tenure as Chair of NACo Arts and Culture Commission she successfully advocated and recruited supporters for various arts initiatives. She served as President of the

State Capitol Foundation for eight years, has been a leading advocate for Clara House, a shelter for abused women and children, and worked to establish the Guilford County Family Justice Centers in Greensboro and High Point. Commissioner Cashion serves on several committees including the NCACC Criminal Justice Steering Committee, the NACo Board of Directors, and the NACo Justice and Public Safety Committee. She has also owned and operated Cashion's Furniture and Decorating Co. since 1970. Kay is a mother of four and a grandmother of seven and a member of 1st Baptist Church, Greensboro.