

Etex Communications and Center Economic Development Corp. Partner to Expand Broadband Access in Rural Texas

Texas, USA - As more rural Texas communities compete with urban areas, local officials are realizing the need for reliable broadband services. Historically, urban areas get more attention from broadband providers based on population centers that offer higher average revenue opportunities, which has created challenges for rural towns and the smaller providers rooted in these communities for decades.

The Texas BDO (Broadband Development Office) has identified that more than 7 million Texans are unserved or underserved regarding broadband, clearly indicating a digital divide. Many of these communities were served by large carriers. Smaller cooperatives were born because surrounding areas were more rural and had no option for telecommunications. Etex, a telecommunications company established in 1952 by a group of farmers in Upshur County, now serves parts of 13 counties, providing connectivity to thousands of East Texans, hundreds of cell towers, 30+ school districts, and countless counties and cities. Etex has become a household name in the region, largely due to demand from rural communities in need.

The City of Center in Shelby County, Texas, is considered urban by many of the rural communities in the area. However, even though the City of Center is labeled to have adequate broadband coverage on broadband maps, it is not always reliable or readily available. City Manager Chad Nehring said, "even with incumbent providers and cable companies serving our community, we consistently have outages and lack of support". Many communities still have antiquated networks that do not keep up with the current broadband demands and growing trends. This has driven communities to reach out to rural focused broadband providers in the region in hopes that they will expand, overbuild, and provide competitive reliable services.

In the spring of 2021, the Center Economic Development Corporation reached out to Etex after learning about the success of other regional projects. From this, a partnership was born. Etex and the CEDC started by applying for a federally funded grant to build reliable broadband inside the city limits. When the hopes of a grant did not materialize, the CEDC decided to take measures into their own hands. The CEDC and Etex decided to invest millions of dollars in a multiyear project to build a new state-of-the-art network. Charlie Cano, CEO of Etex, said, "this project is going to help both businesses and residents with reliable connectivity. Having a secure internet connection is obviously very vital to a community's growth. We are excited to start this partnership as soon as possible since promised state funding programs are still in development and would delay the delivery of critical connections to the City of Center". Construction will begin in the first quarter of 2023 in hopes of connecting customers in early 2024. Deborah Chadwick, Shelby County Chamber President, said, "We are so excited to have a provider that listens to our needs and works with our community to find solutions".

This partnership between Etex and the CEDC will benefit not only the City of Center, but potentially the surrounding rural communities also. It is a step forward in bridging the digital divide and bringing reliable broadband services to rural Texas.