

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1501

April 27, 2022

The Honorable Sanford Bishop, Jr.
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations,
Subcommittee on Agriculture,
Rural Development, FDA, &
Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Andy Harris
Acting Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations,
Subcommittee on Agriculture,
Rural Development, FDA, &
Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Harris:

As you begin crafting the fiscal year 2023 Agriculture, Rural Development, FDA, & Related Agencies Appropriations bill, I respectfully request that you include \$333,200 in community project funding for the Orchard Fiber Project, which will be administered by Osage Municipal Utilities, located at 720 Chestnut Street, Osage, IA 50461, for fiber buildout throughout the Community of Orchard, IA.

Orchard is a small, rural area that is facing a unique set of challenges to receive a fiber network buildout. This ReConnect grant would impact Orchard's 397 residents in 154 households, 14 businesses, 27 farms, and one post office. Orchard relies on the nearest town of Osage for essential services, including use of the school system and health care facilities. The Osage school district provides students with laptops for schoolwork and assignments, which the Orchard students cannot use when they are home without reliable broadband, academically disadvantaging Orchard's next generation. The Osage health care facilities offer telemedicine services, which the Orchard residents are unable to access. Much of the workforce and job opportunities nationwide have increasingly moved online, but the Orchard residents are missing an entire realm of potential due to their inability to telework. Local small businesses are essentially excluded from the e-commerce market and are losing their ability to recruit employees because prospective residents are dissuaded to move to an area lacking reliable internet.

According to the Federal Communications Commission definition of broadband (minimum speeds of 25 Mbps/3 Mbps upload/download), Orchard does not have access to broadband. In September of 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recognized the community's severe need for rural broadband and Orchard received a ReConnect Grant to build out the community's fiber network. Since receiving this grant, Orchard has faced a multitude of challenges and hurdles. In the time since their initial cost estimate, the prices of required materials, labor, and other expenses have increased by over 30 percent. Orchard has exhausted

all other resources to receive the additional funds required, and the recent local government meetings have included discussions on how to return the unusable money to USDA if they are unable to receive this new round of grant funding.

The future of Orchard's economic prosperity and development – and the future of Orchard's children – depends on access to rural broadband. This community project funding request would supplement the previously received ReConnect grant and address the additional expenses that have been caused by inflation, supply chain issues, labor shortages, and other price increases that are arguably caused by federal policy and current events. It would be a disservice to force Orchard to return the original grant and remain at a disadvantage without broadband due to price increases that were entirely out of the community's control.

The Orchard Fiber Project would empower Orchard residents to access health, academic, and professional resources to strengthen the local economy and provide needed parity for students in this small rural community. I strongly urge the Committee to include this community project funding request in the FY23 Agriculture, Rural Development, FDA, & Related Agencies Appropriations bill in order to provide the well-deserved and much needed broadband opportunity to the community of Orchard.

Sincerely,



Ashley Hinson

Member of Congress

Committee on Appropriations