



Urban Rural Connection Project Broadband Connection: Access to High-Speed, Reliable Internet Draft Summary

American Leadership Forum of Oregon's Urban Rural Connection Project

The American Leadership Forum of Oregon (ALF Oregon) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that brings a diverse range of corporate, public, and non-profit leaders together to build effective networks of collaboration and service throughout Oregon. Its purpose is to join and strengthen leaders in order to better serve the public good and to enhance leadership by building on the strengths of diversity and by promoting collaborative problem solving within and among communities.

Since 1985, ALF Oregon has led cohorts of proven, experienced leaders through year-long programming designed to advance this mission. Upon completing their first year, the graduates, called Senior Fellows, have the option to complete a project together that builds on what they learned and puts them in service to themselves, to their classmates, and to Oregon.

The Urban Rural Connection Project (the "Project") is a revisit of engaging Senior Fellows and other experienced leaders in multi-month projects to work in service to Oregon. For more information about the Urban Rural Connection Project, please [CLICK HERE](#), for a link about the Project on our website.

The Project's first phase involved hosting Regional Dialogues that took place in six cities around Oregon. From these Dialogues, the Urban Rural Connection Project Cohort (13 Senior Fellows that planned and facilitated all of the Dialogues, "Cohort") selected three issues for three committees of Senior Fellows and other seasoned leaders to devote their time, leadership, and energy towards exploring and advancing solutions from May - December 2019. The three issues are: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion ([click here for that summary](#)); Broadband Connection: Access to High-Speed, Reliable Internet (summary below); and Land Use Planning: Decisions Made Without All Voices.

Below is a draft summary of the Regional Dialogue conversations surrounding the lack of broadband connection and how that impacts individuals' and communities' ability to thrive. The full report, due in May, will provide summaries of each of the six Regional Dialogues and each of the Priority Issues.

Please note: Below, individuals are described frequently according to the Regional Dialogue that they attended. This is not necessarily where they live, nor does it indicate if they identify as urban, suburban, or rural. All Regional Dialogues included Participants from each of these settings.



Broadband Connection: Access to High-Speed, Reliable Internet

Lack of access to broadband impacts economic growth, educational opportunities, healthcare access, and people's ability to connect with one another and to information. Throughout the Cohort's travels they heard about communities and individuals struggling because of lacking services and opportunities, directly and indirectly impacted by lack of fast, reliable Internet speeds.

Some Participants named the "digital divide" when asked how to define the urban rural divide and what it means to them. The digital divide parallels the urban rural divide, with urban areas having reliable Internet access – in addition to access, at least geographically, to health care, housing, transportation, and jobs – while rural internet access is tenuous, along with their access to services and jobs. One Medford Participant called broadband connection more of a luxury item in rural areas. She continued to say that she cannot get reliable Internet in her Ashland home for many months out of the year even though her household wants it. Even when there is access, the connection may not be reliable or adequate to suit a person's or business' needs.

Participants in all Dialogues named workforce development and economic opportunity as areas as a Priority Issue in their community. A Salem Participant noted the challenge of this in rural areas, "Metro solutions do not translate into rural solutions." He went on to say that outlying communities have been or still are largely reliant on resourced-based industries. They are looking to other industries that are not reliant on natural resources. New technology comes up as an option, but without reliable Internet, it's not yet a viable path forward.

A Lincoln City Participant and coastal resident provided the perspective, "People move to the coast for quality of life and hoping to bring their business. But we struggle with limited power and dirty power, which means that our power doesn't come through on a constant basis. And our Broadband isn't fast." In other words, their power dies or surges frequently enough to be a regular issue.

Medford and Baker City Participants knew of examples where employers had tech jobs to offer in rural areas, but could not find the experienced workers. "I know one individual that he tries to hire technical people and we don't have enough," the Medford Participant said. The Baker City Participant named CAD [computer aided design] designers as an area of work that is needed but the talent pool is shallow in her region. A Salem Participant made a point that the people with technical skills are leaving rural areas for the urbanized areas for more opportunities. A Portland Participant reflected on the challenge in rural areas in that automated economies are slowing in general and entrepreneurs don't look to start new businesses in places with limited Internet connectivity, curbing the capacity to plan ahead and stay current.



What is further confounding is that people could build their skill set through online courses but that of course requires solid connection to the Internet. Participants in many Dialogues reflected on library closures, ceasing the opportunity for many to access the Internet for free. One Baker City Participant pointed out that one-third of the Umatilla Reservation lacks broadband. Salem and Baker City Participants in particular brought up that rural children are drawn to the connectivity of the Internet and that young adults don't want to live in a place not connected to the rest of the world. Regarding younger generations, a Medford Participant felt like she had failed their children, giving the example of a North Carolina program where every school age child has a computer enabling the child to complete homework assignments and to learn and play on her own time. The Participant elaborated, "Without technical computer skills, the school system should at least focus on agriculture, welding, or automotive to prepare the young students."

Three of the six Portland small group discussions included conversations recognizing the role that the Internet plays in our lives today and how the lack of connection in parts of Oregon is not equitable. One Participant believed that urban and rural communities have more in common but we tend to focus on the political divide. "We constantly put ourselves in different buckets. Quality of broadband is important everywhere, but challenges are greater in rural areas." Two of the other Dialogues named the Internet connectivity for all of Oregon as a Priority Issue. Another Participant named the access to education and broadband for all small communities in Oregon as one of her hopes and dreams for Oregon.

While not every group in every Dialogue named broadband connection as one of the Priority Issues, every group listed Priorities impacted by the lack of a reliable broadband connection. For example, one Medford group listed these four items as their Priorities: 1) Seek rural input 2) Develop shared understanding of resource flows 3) Develop shared understanding of needs and strengths 4) Develop shared vision within urban and rural; have a process for doing so. One can hardly imagine accomplishing these goals without sharing information over email or using the Internet as a reference for information. Similarly, Lincoln City named as a Priority Issue: more cooperation and connection between regions and communities. As discussed earlier, groups at all of the Regional Dialogues named workforce development, economic opportunity, educational success as Priorities. Advancing these seem insurmountable without a reliable, accessible Internet connection.

There is meaningful political and financial support behind broadband infrastructure expansion at the local, state and federal level. The Cohort believed that a Priority Issue Committee's focus and connections could further identify the culprits (cost, speed, accessibility) to help with broadband expansion where needed. Whether in a specific region, across the state, or even how, the Cohort left those decisions unprescribed for the Priority Issue Committee to determine. The notion is that expanded reliable Internet service will one day be offered across Oregon, but can our leadership speed the process in some way.

Click [HERE](#) to learn more about the Urban Rural Connection Project. Click [HERE](#) to apply to serve on a Priority Issue Committee. Click [HERE](#) to provide comment on this summary.