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PRESS RELEASE
Port of Columbia Awarded $2 Million Broadband Infrastructure Grant

DAYTON, WA - Port of Columbia staff, along with private partner Columbia iConnect, made a presentation to the Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB) on Thursday, July 14th in Olympia and left with a $2 million award.

Acceptance of the $2 million grant is contingent upon the community providing $500,000 in matching funds. The Port applied for and received $20,000 from the Sherwood Trust, $15,000 from the Warren Community Fund, and $13,500 from the Dayton Columbia County Fund to use as matching funds, and has pledged $20,000 from their 2021 budget for the project as well.

"This is a rare opportunity to bring hard-earned federal tax dollars back to our community for the benefit of our citizens," stated Jennie Dickinson, Port of Columbia executive director. "A relatively small local contribution by the Port and our community partners can benefit thousands of residents."

Requests will be made to Columbia County and the City of Dayton for the remainder of the funds required.

The Port has been working with community partners, including the City of Dayton, Columbia County, and private sector internet service providers since 2019 to address inadequate and unreliable internet service in our community. Even before the pandemic, Port staff heard concerns from many businesses and community members about how limiting our current internet service was. COVID-19 only exacerbated the issue. It became clear that in order for the community to remain attractive to residents and businesses, to meet current health care needs, and to provide adequate opportunities for education, improvements needed to be made.

The Port of Columbia's mission is to maximize public resources and private investment to create jobs, provide infrastructure, and maintain and improve the economic vitality of Columbia County and its communities.

In February 2020, the Port completed a feasibility study for a dark fiber network in the City of Dayton and some adjacent, more dense areas in the county. The study showed that it is financially feasible to operate a fiber optic network under the public/private partnership model in our community. The project would provide access to broadband for any of the 1,278 businesses and residents in the project area that are interested in fiber service.

The Port will not be providing internet service to customers. The system will be what's called an open access network, meaning any interested internet service provider that is willing to invest in equipment can offer fiber internet service to the premises by leasing strands of the Port's fiber infrastructure. Basically, the Port builds the "road," and the private sector "drives" on it to deliver service to customers.

The Port provided information and an invitation to partner to all existing service providers prior to applying for funds, and have signed contingency agreements with 3 companies – Columbia iConnect, PocketiNet, and Emerge by Inland Cellular – to lease fiber from the Port and deliver internet service to their existing and to new customers.

The Port of Garfield recently completed the same type of fiber infrastructure in Pomeroy, and customers there are receiving 1 gigabyte of service for $70 per month through the private internet providers. 50% of the premises in their project area are using this new service.

More information on the project can be found on the Port's website at https://www.portofcolumbia.org/economic-development/broadband/ .

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