

CHARLES COUNTY GOVERNMENT

RURAL BROADBAND TASK FORCE

LONG DRIVEWAY – CATEGORY 3 GRANT PROGRAM

Version 3.1

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1.0 Introduction

Charles County Government (“the County”) has been working to deliver high-speed internet to the rural areas of the County, but due to our geography, topography, and the density of our rural areas, our efforts have been met with significant challenges. However, since 2019, County staff, the elected Board of County Commissioners, and the State of Maryland have dedicated resources to assist in bringing access to high-speed internet into previously unserved areas. And recently – due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this funding has become even more robust.

In 2019, the Rural Broadband Task Force was formed, comprised of members from the Board of Education, the Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative (SMECO), unserved residents, and key County employees. The mission of the Task Force is “to bring broadband to unserved areas of Charles County.”

The Task Force contracted with Columbia Telecommunications Corporations (CTC) Technology & Energy to prepare a Broadband Strategic Plan. The Task Force worked with CTC for several months to develop the Plan – gathering data, developing maps, and interviewing stakeholders. In February 2020, the Plan was finalized and defined three categories of unserved areas in Charles County:

- Category 1 – no existing broadband infrastructure in the area
- Category 2 – “unserved pockets” in areas where broadband infrastructure exists but has not been extended due to area not meeting cable provider’s density requirements
- Category 3 – long driveways where the cost of extending to the home is a barrier for service

The County’s Broadband Strategic Plan has been and continues to be a crucial tool in applying for grant funding and for developing the Long Driveway – Category 3 (LD-Cat3) Grant Program, which will address the Category 3 properties identified above.

Lastly, funding the construction of long driveways is a unique opportunity for residents and the County. The County will closely monitor the program and due to its unique nature, we fully anticipate that changes or updates may need to be made to the requirements documented within the program. We reserve the right to update the dates, funding, criteria, and any other item within this document.

2.0 Definitions

Broadband – high-speed internet that reaches a download speed of 25 megabits per second (Mbps) or faster and an upload speed of 3 Mbps or faster, as defined by the Federal Communications Commission

Internet Service Provider (ISP) – a company that can provide access to the internet. There are currently three ISPs in Charles County: Comcast Xfinity, ThinkBig Networks, and Verizon Fios.

LD-Cat3 – Long Driveway – Category 3 Grant Program

Service Drop – the last part of the installation of fiber/cable, such as along a driveway, that connects the home to the network. The ISP will determine the appropriate construction method and route for the Service Drop. The resident may not choose the method or route of installation.

3.0 Program Guidelines

Charles County Government has established the Long Driveway – Category 3 Grant Program (LD–Cat3) to provide financial assistance to our Category 3 residents. The LD–Cat3 will assist with funding the construction of a Service Drop to connect a home at the end of a long, private driveway to the existing broadband network on the road.

A resident is only eligible if their residence lacks access to broadband service. They are ineligible for LD-Cat3 funding if the service location has existing high-speed internet service from one of the County's current ISPs –Comcast, ThinkBig or Verizon.

Additionally, to be eligible for the LD-Cat3, an ISP (Comcast, ThinkBig, or Verizon) must have a network which runs on the road to which the driveway connects. The ISP must be able to provide service to the location AND be willing to partner with the County on this initiative.

Funding awarded will be based on (1) the ISPs ability to provide service, (2) the length of the driveway, and (3) the cost estimate for the Service Drop. Service Drops that are funded through the LD-Cat3 must be completed on or before December 30, 2024.

3.1 Steps to Obtain LD-Cat3 Funding

- 1) The resident will apply for the LD-Cat3 on the County's website (www.charlescountymd.gov/cat3grant). Residents in the Nanjemoy/Cobb Neck Broadband Buildout Project area who will be served by ThinkBig do not need to apply online due to the existing grant agreement between the County and ThinkBig.
- 2) The County will forward the resident's information to the appropriate ISP(s).
- 3) The ISP will contact the County to:
 - a. Verify the ISPs network infrastructure passes by the resident's home
 - b. Verify a Service Drop to the resident's home can be constructed
 - c. Provide a cost estimate
 - ISPs are private, independent, and for-profit companies. The County does not have any input into, or control over, the quotes that are provided by the ISPs.
- 4) Once the County and the ISP have determined that all the criteria in 3.1 (4) have been met, the resident will work with the ISP to install infrastructure to provide broadband. Each ISP has a unique process to obtain service utilizing the LD-Cat3. The resident will need to work directly with the ISP in order to obtain service.

- 5) The resident will pay their portion of the cost directly to the ISP. The ISP will bill the County for the County's portion of the cost.

3.2 LD-Cat3 Funding Formula

- 1) The County will provide a \$1,000 credit towards the total cost of the Service Drop.
 - a. The County credit cannot be greater than the total cost of the Service Drop.
- 2) The County will pay 90% of the remaining amount of the Service Drop cost.
 - a. The County 90% portion cannot be greater than \$14,000.
- 3) The maximum amount the County will contribute for any service drop is \$15,000.
- 4) The resident will pay the remaining balance of the service drop charge. The resident's contribution will be due based upon the ISP's unique billing procedures and their terms and conditions.

3.3 Reimbursement

The County will reimburse residents retroactively for long driveway costs they incurred from July 1, 2021 through December 31, 2022. The reimbursement will be based upon the criteria in 3.1 (4) and the funding formula outlined in Section 3.2 but cannot exceed the amount that the resident paid the ISP for the long driveway extension. To seek reimbursement:

- 1) The resident will provide a valid invoice from the ISP showing the cost paid for the Long Driveway Service Drop.
- 2) The County will independently verify with the ISP that the resident has meet the criteria in 3.1(4), that the service has been provided and that the invoice has been paid.
- 3) Upon verification of the invoice and payment, the County will provide a check to the resident in the applicable amount as calculated by the funding formula outlined in 3.2, not to exceed the amount that the resident paid to the ISP for the long driveway extension.
- 4) Reoccurring monthly charges for equipment, service, or fees are not eligible for reimbursement through the LD-Cat3.
- 5) Reimbursements for drops that were installed from July 1, 2021 to December 31, 2022 will have up until December 31, 2023, to apply for reimbursement.
- 6) Reimbursements will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

3.3 Hardship Waiver

Residents that qualify for the [Affordable Connectivity Program | Federal Communications Commission \(fcc.gov\)](https://www.fcc.gov/affordable-connectivity-program) may also receive a hardship waiver for the 10% resident contribution for the Service Drop costs. Residents must provide proof that they have been accepted into the Affordable Connectivity Program in order to qualify for the hardship waiver.

3.4 Special Considerations and Exceptions

- 1) The resident may be required to provide an easement for the ISP to install the Service Drop. The easement will provide the ISP the right to use the homeowner's land while constructing or maintaining the Service Drop. The homeowner still owns the land, even if they grant an easement.
- 2) Residents are limited to one Service Drop per household.
- 3) The resident may not choose the method or route of installation for the Service Drop. Costs associated with any resident preferences can and/or may include additional charges which will be the responsibility of the resident and not the County. These charges will be excluded from the grant provided by the County.