The Windham Regional Commission (WRC) and its partners, ValleyNet and Rural Innovation Strategies Inc. (RISI) were awarded a Broadband Innovation Grant (BIG) from the state’s Department of Public Service in late December 2019. The resulting Windham Region Broadband Project was informed by the hard work of many town broadband committees and other volunteer efforts, as well as education and outreach organized by the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation.

WRC understands the importance of high-quality, high-speed and reliable internet access to our communities for many reasons – connecting students with teachers and online education resources, connecting patients with medical providers, connecting rural businesses with clients and employers with employees, as well as for entertainment and news. Broadband can provide that level of service to Windham Region communities that are currently unserved and underserved.

The Windham Region Broadband Project involves a two-step process, as laid out in the BIG grant: 1) development of a feasibility study, and 2) development of a business plan. The goal of the feasibility study is to determine the interest and need for broadband development throughout the region and the best way to implement that development. Towns have been asked to pass a simple resolution confirming their participation as well as appointing a broadband contact person.

A key component of the feasibility study is a community survey. WRC has asked towns to distribute surveys about their broadband needs, and ability and willingness to pay for service to their citizens. Online and paper surveys (and flyers) are available on WRC’s website, as well as at town halls, libraries, community centers and other gathering places. This information is essential to the development of the feasibility study and an actionable business plan.

The feasibility study will look at the use of Communications Union Districts (CUDs) which have been used to implement broadband in other regions. The feasibility plan will identify how many and what CUDs make the most sense to provide region-wide broadband coverage based on geography and existing services. The CUD model is especially useful in rural areas to engage a critical mass to provide this infrastructure in underserved areas.

The entire project will be completed within six months. The primary project contact at WRC is Sue Westa, swesta@windhamregional.org. Please contact her for more information or if you have questions or see the project website www.windhamregional.org/broadband.