

TAG INFRASTRUCTURE TALKS: S01 EP06 – BROADBAND FUNDING IN GEORGIA WITH JESSICA SIMMONS OF THE GEORGIA TECHNOLOGY AUTHORITY

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GUEST: JESSICA SIMMONS

Alan Poole:

Welcome to the *TAG Infrastructure Talks* podcast. I'm your host, Alan Poole. I'm a partner at Troutman Pepper, and I'm a board member of the TAG Infrastructure Society. Today I have with me Jessica Simmons, the Deputy Chief Information Officer for broadband and special projects of the Georgia Technology Authority. Jessica, thanks for joining us.

Jessica Simmons:

Wonderful. Glad to be here.

Alan Poole:

Yeah, we're very excited to have you, ready to get into broadband. This is our first real broadband episode. So, I guess let's get started.

Tell us about your background and how you got to this role.

Jessica Simmons:

Absolutely. So, I have worked in a couple of state agencies. I've been with the state of Georgia for almost 10 years, and also have private sector experience as well, and so obviously, with all of the funding coming for broadband that the state has both received, and obviously, we're still expecting that we'll discuss throughout the podcast, I was asked to step into this role to help provide technical assistance and manage the program as we are able to disperse funding in partnership led by the Office of Planning and Budget to be able to, obviously, expand service throughout Georgia.

Alan Poole:

So, is your office considered the state broadband office as you'd hear in the national parlance?

Jessica Simmons:

Yes and no, and I'll describe that. So senate bill 402, which established a lot of the broadband activities at the state in 2018, gave some responsibilities to my organization, the Georgia Technology Authority, and then others to the Department of Community Affairs, and so it's really the partnership of our two agencies and the specific activities that we conduct in our partnership forms, the state broadband office, and so we are not clearly as defined as some states that have a dedicated office, but we fulfill all of the functions and duties in partnership.

Alan Poole:

I'm glad you brought up 2018, because for a lot of states, they're just getting started, but our state started looking at this a little more seriously a couple of years ago. Can you tell me a little bit more about what that senate bill did and what avenues it opened up?

Jessica Simmons:

Absolutely. So, the state of Georgia was very well poised for, really, as best as we could, from a broadband perspective, to use our data to implement funding that has already been announced by Governor Kemp, or that we're looking to implement in the future. In 2018, again, with the enabling legislation, the biggest thing that really established was the creation of the Georgia Broadband availability map. What that is a location level map that helps the state understand where locations are served and unserved, and if they ultimately are in a served or unserved census block. That's the way that, historically, the federal government, through the FCC, has done broadband mapping, was down to the census block level. Georgia took that one step further and actually went down to the location level, and so at that point, we had the most robust, specific data to really understand where specifically, really, were our most unserved areas in Georgia, and then really able to start designing programs to be able to assist the areas of most need.

As part of some of the new programs that are being stood up that we'll speak about in a moment, the FCC is now actually creating a location level map, essentially creating a national version of what the state of Georgia was tasked by the legislature to do back in 2018, and so now, with that map as a resource, and it's gone through multiple refreshes at this point, and the state of Georgia having the experience of mapping for the last few years and really fine tuning that process has really been a huge benefit for the state to make sure that funding gets allocated in a very strategic and data driven way.

Alan Poole:

It's interesting that this model came out before the FCC's current updated mapping model, because, as we'll get into it a little bit, that's driving where the BEAD funding is going to go. Is your office in charge of reconciling your data with the FCC's data and deciding what to do about that?

Jessica Simmons:

We are. We work with the Carl Vincent Institute at the University of Georgia, who does the state's broadband map in partnership with the Department of Community Affairs, and so that's something that we have collectively been looking at, the FCC mapping process, talking with the FCC about how that process is going, looking at our data, comparing the fabric to our fabric that was developed by Carl Vincent, and making a determination as to if we're going to file formally in the challenge process. So that is something that we're actively taking a look at, and having that data already as a state, though, is incredibly impactful, just as a lot of other states are now working to stand up a location level map. The state has obviously had this resource in place for a few years, and so we really feel like we're ahead of the game to be able to have that resource in place and to be able to utilize it, obviously, for grants that have already been awarded earlier this year by the governor, but then, obviously, as we prepare for future great rounds as well.

Alan Poole:

Sure. Another aspect of the 2018 bill that interests me and a lot of clients I have in the private sector is the Broadband Ready Communities concept. So that required two things. Adopting a sensible franchise ordinance for permitting in the right of way, and also a comprehensive plan, and a number of communities have met that standard, but not all the communities in Georgia, right?

Jessica Simmons:

That's correct. So, there are quite a few now broadband ready communities. That program is still managed by the Department of Community Affairs. A community can either be a broadband ready city or county. Both can move forward with that process. So it really is a fantastic program, because what it does is, as you just described, really kind of makes it clear to internet service providers that that community is going to be a really good partner in trying to streamline the process to expand broadband into that community, and so it really is a great tool, and we really encourage all communities to participate in that program, because it's something that not only does it indicate to providers that you're going to be a good partner and really helpful with the process, but then also, again, starting to think about the comprehensive planning and looking into the other components that would go into, obviously, having large infrastructure buildouts taking place within their communities.

So that that's a fantastic program that a number of communities have moved forward getting their designation, but we always encourage, obviously, everybody to participate, and so that's also something in the current grant program that the state is currently running, the Capital Projects Fund Grant Program, that is a component of asking if the community that's being applied for is a broadband ready community, and so that is something that, obviously, is a great thing that communities can be working with the Department of Community Affairs now to go ahead and go through the steps of getting their designation.

Alan Poole:

It's such a fantastic program for all the reasons you mentioned, and it dovetails into the BEAD NOFO, as well, I think, because the NTIA is trying to get states to look at this kind of thing, and Georgia's already been doing it, so it seems like there's a good avenue to dovetail with the BEAD funding as well.

Jessica Simmons:

Absolutely. I completely agree. Again, this was a program that was established back in 2018, so it's been on the books in Georgia here for a while, but then more than anything, I think you're absolutely right, it dovetails very nicely into it, because obviously, with any of the grant programs that the state has run, either through the state fiscal recovery fund grant program through ARPA, our current capital projects fund grant program, and then, obviously, looking forward to the IJB program, there's a very heavy component of community involvement, and so it's a great program that was established, and I think it really is going to pair nicely with the work that we're going to need to do for all of our BEAD planning, and then, obviously, for the ultimate grant cycle as well.

Alan Poole:

One more thing in the past before we get into all the fantastic opportunities in the present and the future. Senate bill two in 2019 opened the door for electric cooperatives to get into the broadband business, which can take a number of different flavors, and we've seen some success in that, haven't we?

Jessica Simmons:

Absolutely. So, since the passage of that, it's really been incredible to see the EMCs in Georgia really stepping up and obviously finding kind of new and innovative ways to serve their current

customers, and obviously, they have very big territories throughout the state of Georgia, and there's a lot of different models. A lot of EMCs have taken the approach that if they've chosen to get into broadband, that ultimately their plans are to provide broadband service to all of their customers on their electric territory.

Others are targeting the locations are a little bit more of those unserved pockets within their communities, but it really was a great opportunity to allow more people in this space to be able to provide service to Georgians, and a lot of EMCs have been actively either getting into broadband, making the decision to do that, or obviously, certainly assessing what they would like to do in their area related to broadband service, but it certainly greatly expanded the ability for really just having another, essentially, group that could provide this service, and so we're definitely seeing that EMCs are certainly building to a lot of their customers throughout the state, and just having the opportunity to have somebody else in the space to, again, try to serve Georgians, certainly helps us expedite getting broadband service throughout our state.

Alan Poole:

Next let's move to the present. There have been multiple different federal and other funding opportunities for broadband, starting with the Rural Digital Opportunities Fund, and moving up to capital projects today. Can you describe those programs for us and some of the differences between them?

Jessica Simmons:

Sure, absolutely. So first, going chronologically, you have the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, which is a program run by the FCC at the federal level, and there were significant awards made in Georgia through that program. It was a reverse auction administered by the FCC, where internet service providers applied directly, and so there were a number of awards in Georgia, and at that point, though, what we're looking at is how all of these different funding streams worked together to accomplish the ultimate goal. There is a longer build out window for RDOF, and so we're obviously looking to see how that factors in and compliments the other funding sources throughout the program.

For State Fiscal Recovery Fund under the American Rescue Plan Act, that is the set of resources that Governor Kemp announced, over \$400 million in preliminary awards earlier this year back in February for Last Mile broadband infrastructure grants, and that, along with the Capital Projects Fund, both of those programs or funding projects that have to be completed by the end of 2026, and so those programs will be, for the most part, completed potentially before the programs are required to through RDOF.

Capital Projects Fund, which is currently the grant that the state is currently administering, has that same timeline. The state just closed, last week, our application window for that particular grant, and so those are still under review. The state was, from a formula basis, awarded just shy of \$260 million for the Capital Projects Fund, and that is a subset of resources for connectivity within the American Rescue Plan Act, and so far, we've implemented, are in the process of implementing federal funding contained within the American Rescue Plan Act, and then as we look to the future, then at that point, we're looking for the BEAD program as well, which I'm sure we'll talk about in a minute with all of the kind of specific dates and timelines associated with that.

Alan Poole:

With the funds awarded so far in the current grant process that just closed, can you tell me a little bit about the mix of different types of entities that have applied and succeeded in the grant funding?

Jessica Simmons:

Sure, absolutely. So, for the State Fiscal Recovery Fund program within the American Rescue Plan Act, that was the grant that the governor announced earlier this year, based on treasury guidance, partnerships were incentivized, and so for the most part, the awards that were announced and successful were partnerships between either counties and local governments and internet service providers, also through the EMCs here in Georgia, and then also through associations.

For Capital Projects Fund based on some federal procurement guidance and kind of ease of use of the program, we ended up changing that so that just the internet service providers or whoever ends up owning the network in the end is eligible to apply, and then as we look forward to BEAD in the future based on the Notice of Funding Opportunity, obviously, there's a wider array of applicants for that, but we are seeing a lot of partnerships throughout this space, and like you mentioned, lots of different partnerships, whether that's a local government partnering with an ISP. These are mainly Last Mile projects... Well, they're all Last Mile projects, but obviously at some point, some of them do have a Middle Mile component getting infrastructure to that particular area, and then also, as we see with a vast majority of the resources thus far dedicated to Last Mile projects, the possibility for obviously potentially needing to bolster Middle Mile, and so that's actually why the state has applied for NTIA's Middle Mile grant.

We're also aware of a lot of other applications for NTIA's Middle Mile grant within the state of Georgia, so we're very encouraged that hopefully one of the applicants within Georgia is successful for that grant through NTIA that's currently underway.

Alan Poole:

I guess at this point, it might be helpful to the listeners, just in case there's anyone that doesn't know, to talk about the difference between Last Mile and Middle Mile. I guess how I would describe it is Last Mile is to the customer, Middle Mile is connections in the background that don't necessarily go cross country. Is that how you think about it?

Jessica Simmons:

Exactly. It's your back haul connection to the access point in Atlanta versus when we really think about Last Mile that's really bringing that service into local neighborhoods and ultimately getting that to homes and businesses here in Georgia. So, it's really kind of your infrastructure side, and then really getting it to your end user customer.

Alan Poole:

Now turning towards the present and future, we'll start talking about the BEAD fund or Broadband Equity Access and Deployment. Before we do that, I'd like to get your read on the biggest challenges and opportunities in broadband deployment as it stands today in Georgia.

Jessica Simmons:

Absolutely. So again, from an opportunity standpoint, we are very well poised of having the resource of the Georgia broadband availability map. It's an incredible tool that, thankfully, the state has had for a few years now, as a lot of other states are now working to stand up that same resource, and I also think that having the ability to make data driven decisions to strategically deploy funding is just so critical, and so having that resource in the previous grant programs that have already been stood up that are either currently underway, and then certainly as we look forward to BEAD being able to use that resource, again, as we discussed previously, whether that's to check the accuracy of the new map to potentially use that for a challenge if the state decides to move forward and go through that process with the FCC, and just the experience that the state has had over the last year or so of obviously deploying grant funding for broadband.

We've got a good team in place now that has now gone through a couple of iterations of broadband grants, and so we're well poised and ready for BEAD of really having the right kind of staff and infrastructure in place to really manage a program of this size.

Thinking about challenges, I think a lot of our challenges are going to be similar to other states. Again, we certainly don't have the challenge of having good data, but one of the big challenges I think we are going to see is potentially from a workforce and materials perspective. One of the things to think about is a lot of states have been deploying broadband funding through one of their resources within ARPA, whether that was the capital projects fund or state fiscal recovery funds, but states have to just obligate that funding by the end of 2024, and so it's really varied across the board when states are actually standing up their broadband grants and programs.

When everybody finds out what their BEAD allotment is, they submit their five year action plan, they submit their initial proposal, obviously, with approval of the initial proposal that will unlock 20% of the funding, and then to go ahead and run your program and ultimately with the final proposal, I think we have the potential that a lot of the funding from the BEAD program, could potentially hit a lot of states at the same time, and so what we've seen of a lot of states, maybe not intentionally, but kind of staggering their programs based on running a grant through ARPA or state funds or whatever the funding source, based on when they were ready to stand up that program, just... again, it has to be obligated by the end of 2024. I think we are going to see with BEAD, there could be a potential bottleneck, just because you're going to have a very significant amount of funding potentially injected into all the states roughly at the same time.

Alan Poole:

They have to deal with, among other things, that BEAD funding can't go towards locations that already have committed funding, but isn't necessarily built out.

Jessica Simmons:

That's correct.

Alan Poole:

Adding on top of that, and as we've seen with RDOF, sometimes that funding doesn't work out. How do you deal with that type of eventuality when it comes up?

Jessica Simmons:

I think that's a great question. I think that's something that we're still certainly looking into and talking to our counterparts in other states about how they're really handling their current programs or really also looking to tackle that issue as well. I think we've got a few ideas and a few strategies of how we're going to handle that, but really though, as a whole, I think what's really important to look at is making sure that there's really good communication and really good partnerships and data sharing, just because, again, the FCC obviously, stood up RDOF. There's the possibility, I'm not sure. I certainly don't want to speak to it if it's going to happen or not, but the possibility of a second round of RDOF. Obviously, USDA with their various rounds of reconnect is still doing broadband grant programs, and then obviously, states are running their own grant programs, either with state appropriated money or the various subsets of ARPA, either state fiscal recovery funds or capital projects fund.

So all of that is happening collectively right now before, obviously, any of the BEAD funding flows to the states, and so I think that it's going to be really important just to understand the complexity and really focus and really lean into those partnerships to make sure that we are getting these resources to unserved, unfunded locations, or underserved, unfunded locations, rather than, obviously, potentially having overlapping funding through the programs that are either administered by the federal government and then, obviously, that are administered by the states, and so I think the partnerships are really important just to make sure that we're really strategically focusing this funding, and then also looking at it, like you mentioned, of also very closely monitoring the other various programs out there, because even though something has a funding commitment, it doesn't necessarily mean that that build out will come to fruition.

So obviously, we are very closely monitoring all of the projects within the state of Georgia that have already been announced by the governor, and certainly tracking those through completion, but also very closely monitoring if there have been any defaults in the state of Georgia related to RDOF, or just trying to keep an ear to the ground if it appears that there's a concern with a particular award potentially defaulting or being rescinded or something like that, with one of the federal programs so that we understand and really have, as best as we can, an up to date understanding of what locations will be eligible for funding and those that already do have a funding commitment, whether it's something through a state administered program or through another federal program. There's a lot of programs that are going to be happening simultaneously, and so I think we really have to make sure we maintain really good lines of communication so that we're really targeting different areas for funding.

Alan Poole:

One of the themes with all these rounds of funding is community partnership. Can you tell me a little bit about the ways in which your office has partnered with communities and stakeholders and even the private sector to figure out how to tackle this problem?

Jessica Simmons:

Absolutely. So, we've really tried to be as supportive as we can, with the understanding, though, that obviously, while we're providing technical assistance to a grant program, we have to be very mindful and objective when we're looking at it from that front as well. Again, really encouraging communities to take part in the Broadband Ready program. Again, that designation is a great first step.

We also have a lot of communities that reach out to us and say, "I so desperately want broadband in my community, but I can't get any ISPs interested," and so at that point, we obviously work to make sure that they've got good contacts with various ISPs, try to find out who they've reached out to. Obviously, we try to make sure that that's as comprehensive as possible. That is a place where we do utilize the FCC map quite a bit, because that way, we can publicly point them to providers that are in their area that they might not have been aware of, and that's all public information.

Also, really encourage them to reach out to providers that might have gotten a federal funding commitment or another type of funding commitment within their community, because maybe that group has not started actively building to their RDOF locations within that county yet, but maybe they could partner with the county and at least talk about a plan for trying to extend beyond just their RDOF awarded territory.

Same thing with Safe Fiscal Recovery funds. Obviously, to see if there are ways to potentially expand upon, obviously, the areas that have already been funded, and so we really try to encourage people to try to at least point them in the right direction using the resources available to find out who could be a good ISP partner, what ISPs are in the area based on the publicly available information at the federal level, and then, again, just really trying to promote the broadband ready program and just trying to work with various... The Georgia Municipal Association and ACCG to really do anything we can to serve as a resource to their members, as they're looking to really bolster, obviously, broadband within their communities.

Alan Poole:

One of the things that really interested me about the BEAD Notice of Funding Opportunity, or NOFO, as you would call it, is it attempts to shape state level policy to some extent by the NTIA, while still, obviously, respecting the separation of powers and whatnot. A lot of the efforts from the NTIA seem to have already been met in Georgia. The thing that comes up in my practice the most is barriers to deployment. So, you have allowing electric cooperatives to get into the space, the broadband ready initiative to ensure that permitting works the right way. Are there any other areas that you're looking at that maybe Georgia's not quite in step of what the NTIA wants to see, but you think it could be?

Jessica Simmons:

On a very technical level, first, to look at it of how we map and how our state law dictates that we map, currently, in Georgia, you're either served or unserved, and that's at the 25/3 speed, obviously, download and upload. With that, again, it's very cut and dry. Either you're served or you're unserved. Obviously, BEAD adds a third category to that of served, underserved, and then unserved, with the underserved being anybody that can hit 25/3, but cannot get to a 100/20.

Right now, again, based on our mapping effort, we do have additional information behind the scenes, but we can't publicly display that, and so that is something that we're going to need to take a look at just to see what potential changes we might need to make just to be able to fully implement getting resources to the underserved locations, as are contemplated within BEAD, but I think as a whole, I think we're well poised, again. We've got a fantastic map. We've got a lot of data to make data driven decisions to get this funding targeted to the areas that need it the most.

Again, we've got the broadband ready designation, which really helps promote, again, that community engagement that certainly... One of the components we'll be doing for community engagement is we prepare for BEAD, and again, obviously, the BEAD NOFO is 90 plus pages, and so there's a lot that... As we comb through it, I've read it multiple times, and I feel like every time I read it, I see something new, but that's not a surprise with something that is, obviously, that lengthy of a document, but we certainly will do whatever we need to do to properly implement, just because, again, it's certainly going to get service to a great deal of locations within the state of Georgia, and so we'll make sure we do what we need to do to get it done.

Alan Poole:

Let's talk about timing a little bit. What's happening now? What's the next steps, and maybe when do we think the funding's actually going to start pouring forth?

Jessica Simmons:

Sure. So, the state just received notice that we have been approved for our digital equity planning grant, along with our BEAD planning grant, and so we're actually still signing our grant award agreement on that. So that was information that was actually... We were notified last week, and so the reason why that's important is when our period of performance starts, that starts a clock for both digital equity and also for BEAD.

We have 270 days from the date that we receive our funding to create our five year action plan of how we're going to get service to all locations in Georgia, and then we have a year within receiving our funding, or when our period of performance starts, for our digital equity planning grant to produce the state's digital equity plan, and so it's very important to remember those dates, because obviously, that certainly will be our kickoff and when the clock starts for the state of Georgia coming up very shortly here.

So then at that point, we certainly can turn in those plans much sooner than that, but there is a lot. As you can see in the NOFO, there's a lot of work that the state needs to do as we create our five year action plan, and then really just a great deal of community engagement, and so at that point, based on those timelines, at that point, then we have to get both of those plans approved by NTIA, and then at that point, we'll also submit an initial proposal that will be due within 180 days of the notice of funding amounts. So, at that point, once we find out what we're going to receive, then we have to submit an initial proposal which, essentially, will describe our grant plan, discuss kind of the grant process, our parameters that we put around that, and what the actual process will look like, very similar to how the state released our Notice of Funding Opportunity for the Capital Projects fund grant program. That will really just be us kind of describing to NTIA our grant program to implement and disperse BEAD funding.

Then once we get that approved, then at that point, we'll go ahead and, obviously, move forward with our program, and then that is capped off by submitting a final proposal. The big thing that's obviously dictating a lot of that timeline... First, obviously, are our planning grants that start the clock for our deliverables for both of those programs, but then also, again, I think the biggest is the 180 days from receiving... For our initial proposal after the notice of funding amounts, is released just because, ultimately, that is the piece right now that is still unknown.

Obviously, the FCC is working on finalizing the first iteration of their location level map, but then obviously, there is a challenge process following that for the availability challenge, and that's a pretty broad challenge process that many people, other than just ISPs or state governments, can participate in that. Again, it's a very broad program anybody that can challenge.

So after, obviously, all those challenges are adjudicated, what might come out of a follow up iteration of the map, I think, will probably be more than likely what funding will be based off of, but so at that point, it's unknown right now of how long that adjudication process will take to complete, and then ultimately, that will determine our funding amount, and then that will trigger the 180 day clock for the initial proposal, and so that is really what triggers of actually getting funding rolling to the states, is submitting and getting the initial proposal approved.

So, at this point, again, it's a guess, but I think early next year, we should hopefully know what our funding amount will be, and then at that point, that will start our 180-day clock for our initial proposal, essentially our grant plan, and then go ahead and move forward with the program in full swing at that point. So primarily, I would say... Again, this is still very unknown, but really kind of mid to late 2023 is when I think we could really see this particular program getting stood up, and probably towards the later end of 2023, just based on the fact of federal approval.

One of the things I think it's really important to note is Georgia was one of the first states to actually be able to deploy Safe Fiscal Recovery fund money for broadband and go ahead and get our process rolling, and one of the reasons why we're able to so quickly do that was because of the quality of data within our map. If a state, obviously, doesn't have a map or they're working to stand that up, they don't have that resource to really conduct their grant program yet, and so I think that that's something that's just kind of important to understand, the speed to be able to stand everything up. Obviously, we're going to work to stand up BEAD as quickly as possible, but the mapping data has got to be accurate to, obviously, make sure that everybody's comfortable with the ultimate funding allotment, and so at that point, I think that it will probably be mid to late next year before we really see the actual grant portion of this stood up. However, our work is starting very soon related to all of the work needed for our deliverables of our digital equity plan, and also our five-year action plan.

Alan Poole:

In the digital equity plan, we didn't really cover that, but that's a necessary component for the BEAD plan, is it not?

Jessica Simmons:

Yes, absolutely. So, it's a separate requirement for our digital equity planning grant, and then following that, there'll be a capacity grant from NTIA as well, but that really kind of goes hand in hand with our five-year action plan, and NTIA is really advising states to really develop those two plans in conjunction with each other, certainly as we engage the community. Really trying to get the full scope of understanding of not only broadband availability in Georgia, which is really kind of the focus of the five year plan and our mapping effort, but also really understanding affordability and adoption and availability of devices in ways that the state, obviously, can craft our digital equity plan to go ahead and then start working to put that in place to really focus on, obviously, the other components beyond just availability of infrastructure, but obviously, addressing the other components of adoption and affordability, obviously.

One of the other big components within the IAJA was funding the affordable connectivity program with the FCC for five years, which can provide up to a \$30 a month subsidy for broadband internet in a onetime subsidy for a device, and so that's obviously something that's going to factor in, certainly, into our planning as well, and the state is already doing a good bit of work through other agencies to make sure that people are aware of that resource that is being funded through the IAJA as well.

Alan Poole:

Normally, at this point in an episode, I ask what your greatest challenges are right now, but I think you've pretty well laid them out. I've heard everybody in the NTIA say that your job is kind of the hardest job right now, and it certainly sounds like you have a lot to do, but it sounds like you've got a good handle on everything that needs to be done. What are your highest hopes for the next five years? What would you like to see happen the most?

Jessica Simmons:

Well, obviously, the biggest ultimate goal is getting service to the unserved and underserved in Georgia. I think we've got great resources in place to be able to run these programs, and just a really great opportunity to really, obviously, expand service into our communities. I think that we saw Georgia, obviously, based on the passage of Senate Bill 402 in 2018, obviously really highlighted the need for broadband, and obviously started the state's work before the pandemic, and then obviously, I think that we've seen that with the pandemic and more kind of teleworking options, virtual learning, telehealth, you name it, there are just so many virtual things that can provide so many opportunities for citizens these days that we have such a great opportunity that yes, we've got a lot going on, yes, there's certainly challenges, but there's challenges with any program, and I think that we've got a great opportunity over the next couple of years to really make a difference and really go ahead and close the digital divide in Georgia.

Alan Poole:

Well, it sounds like the best is yet to come, and I really hope we can do this again in one, two, however many years when we've really seen some progress.

Jessica Simmons:

Absolutely.

Alan Poole:

For the new initiatives, but I'd just like to say thank you for joining us. I had a really great time talking with you, and I think our listeners will love it too.

Jessica Simmons:

Thank you. Thank you so much for the opportunity. We really appreciate it.

Alan Poole:

Absolutely. Thanks for joining us for another episode. Please be sure to subscribe to *TAG Infrastructure Talks* on your podcast listening service of choice, and we'll see you next time.

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