



# Springfield Sangamon Growth Alliance

## REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

### Building Broadband Networks in Sangamon County

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Springfield Sangamon Growth Alliance (SSGA) is soliciting proposals from Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to partner with SSGA and the county to bring better broadband to the rural parts of the County that are not considered as served by the BEAD grant program.

In March 2022, SSGA received a Broadband Needs and Assessment Feasibility Report, which created [a sustainable broadband master plan](#) for the entire County to address existing digital inequities and barriers to access, adoption, and utilization of broadband by residents, businesses, and institutions. In addition, the report provided an overview of the significant amount of federal and state resources available for broadband expansion. The plan documented research and findings related to pursuing grants, such as identifying broadband gaps, quantifying the cost of building a fiber network, market research related to market penetration, and other findings. One of the primary recommendations of the feasibility report is to engage with existing Internet Service Providers to understand their interest in expanding broadband networks into the unserved and underserved parts of the County.

### About Sangamon County and the SSGA

Located in the heartland of Illinois and the nation, Sangamon County was established in 1821 and had an estimated population of 200,000 in an area of 877 square miles. Sangamon County has a strong and thriving local economy based on healthcare, professional services, state government, tourism, and agriculture, all of which help provide for one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state. Sangamon County enjoys a national reputation as a wonderful place to live, do business, and raise a family. It is home to several of the nation's most significant historic sites.

For more information on Sangamon County, visit <https://co.sangamon.il.us>.

The SSGA is committed to pursuing economic prosperity and growth for Sangamon County and the City of Springfield, Illinois. Since its founding in 2018, this public-private sector partnership has advanced regional economic development efforts. Led by a volunteer, diverse, industry-driven board of directors, SSGA is helping create and market a financially sound community that can attract new businesses and skilled talent while retaining the innovative companies and local workforce who already make Sangamon County their home.

For more information on Sangamon County, visit <http://www.thriveinspi.org>.

## 2. GENERAL REQUIREMENTS / BACKGROUND

Broadband expansion has been determined to be a high priority by the County Board, which has authorized the issuance of this RFI and is willing to consider providing local support for the Connect Illinois Round 4 Program (BEAD).

The County previously published an RFI in 2023 with little success in finding a broadband provider partner. It is our hope this second RFI process will yield better results. This RFI is offering letters of support and a remote possibility of providing local matching grants to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that will leverage the funding to pursue additional grant funding from the Connect Illinois Round 4 Broadband Grant Program (BEAD). The county executive has retained SSGA to lead the Request for Information (RFI) process in soliciting proposals from ISPs to build rural broadband networks.

To put some structure on proposals from ISPs, the County has subdivided the BEAD-eligible unserved and underserved areas in the County into five sectors as defined by the maps of grant-eligible areas provided in Addendum B:

1. Northwest sector (NW)
2. Northeast sector (NE)
3. Southeast sector (SE)
4. Southwest sector (SW)
5. Central Sector (CEN)

The first map shows grant-eligible areas defined by the State of Illinois BEAD Challenge Map and NTIA-eligible areas. We note that we will accept proposals covering the Central Sector. However, we believe many of the homes shown on the State's map for that area are likely already considered to be served.

Shapefiles of the County and each of these service areas are available at:

<https://www.thriveinspi.org/doing-business-in-spi/projects/>

The County will utilize the responses to this RFI to determine its willingness to provide letters of support and possibly deploy County funds to support viable broadband projects. If funding is provided, prospective ISPs should consider the conditions imposed in funding such broadband infrastructure projects:

- Construction on the County's portion of the grant-funded project must be completed by Dec. 31, 2026, and utilized first before expending resources from the Connect Illinois Round 4 Program (BEAD).
- The ISP must be willing to offer service to every home and business in the proposed service area(s).
- Projects should address "unserved or underserved households or businesses" or one or more households or businesses not currently served by a wireline connection that reliably delivers 100 Mbps download and 20 Mbps upload speeds.
- Projects funded by County funds must be designed to provide service, upon completion, to (i) reliably meet or exceed symmetrical 100 Mbps download speed and upload speeds; or (ii), in limited cases, reliably meet or exceed 100 Mbps download speed and between 20 Mbps and 100 Mbps upload speed and be scalable to a minimum of 100 Mbps download and upload speeds. The County strongly prefers assisting projects that exceed the 100 Mbps symmetrical speed threshold.

ISPs may propose County funding to supplement several broadband grant programs, including:

- The County will consider proposals that provide letters of support and possibly limited matching funds for the Connect Illinois Round 4 Program (BEAD: Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program), which provides \$1.1 billion to expand high-speed infrastructure deployment. Expectations are that these grants will begin to solicit grant applications sometime in mid to late 2024.
- ISPs are responsible for understanding the requirements and application required for the Connect Illinois Round 4 Program (BEAD).

The County provides the following context:

**Sangamon County Preferences:**

- The County is not - nor does it want to become - an Internet Service Provider. The County's role is limited to providing some funding for broadband infrastructure, making any County assets that might benefit broadband deployment available, and working with local, state, and

- federal partners to secure rights of way and other necessary permitting.
- The County has a preference for supporting fiber projects.

The following are some demographic trends in the county that ISPs might want to consider:

- Population Growth. The 2020 Census reported that the county population decreased by 0.6% from 2010 to 2020. The population of Illinois decreased by 0.1%.
- Population Ages. The county has the same percentage of children, at 5.6%, as the state and of persons under 18, at 22.1%. Sangamon County has a higher rate of those over 65 at 18.1% than the Illinois average of 16.6%.
- Homeownership. There is a higher percentage of home ownership in the county at 70.0% than the state average of 66.3%. The average home in the county costs \$144,100 compared to the state average of \$202,100.
- Education. The percentage of those in the county with a high school diploma is 92.5%, higher than the statewide average of 89.7%. The percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher is 34.1%, slightly below the statewide average of 35.5%.
- Income. The median household income of \$61,743 is below the statewide average of \$68,428. Per capita income of \$35,549 is lower than the statewide average of \$37,306. The percentage of homes in poverty at 12.8% is higher than the statewide average of 11.08%.

### **3. GENERAL INFORMATION REQUESTED**

This RFI aims to gather information about the level of interest by ISPs in building robust broadband networks that solve identified broadband gaps in rural Sangamon County.

Note that this RFI is for planning purposes only, and the County will not feel obligated to make any funding awards. Should Sangamon County choose to proceed based on information received in this RFI, the County Executive will determine the next steps.

Each respondent must complete the RFI Response Form labeled Addendum A and indicate the sectors of the County that it will consider serving – and a preference for the areas it is most interested in serving.

The County will consider this kind of response to this RFI:

- Last-Mile Proposals. The County is hoping for proposals that will bring last-mile broadband to be unserved and underserved households. This will be the County's primary priority in evaluating responses.

### **4. RFI RESPONSE INSTRUCTIONS**

The submitted response must comply with the requirements set forth in this RFI. Adherence to these requirements will ensure a fair and objective analysis of all RFI responses. Failure to provide any information requested may result in the rejection of the RFI response. Respondents to the first RFI are welcome to resubmit during this process.

## Questions, Response, Due Date:

### RFI Timeline

The RFI has an aggressive timeline. The goal is to make notify awards to ISPs in late May to provide time for ISPs to incorporate any County letters or matching support for the Connect Illinois Round 4 BEAD program.

RFI Issued	March 27, 2024
RFI Questions Due	April 8, 2024, by email by 2:00 PM CST
Responses to Questions	April 12, 2024, to ISPs
RFI Responses Due	April 30, 2024, by email by 2:00 PM CST
RFI Interviews	May 13-17, 2024

If you have questions regarding any part of this RFI, please submit questions electronically by email to the Project Contact listed below by (April 8, 2024, 2:00 PM CST). Questions posed by ISPs will be answered within three business days and sent to all ISPs who have indicated an interest in the RFI. If you want to be included on the list that sees responses to questions, please email the Project Contact below.

Completed RFI responses should be submitted electronically by email to the Project Contact below by April 30, 2024, by 2:00 PM CST. A response should be submitted as a PDF file containing the complete response, shapefiles, or a KMZ of the ISP's proposed project area(s). ISPs who respond after this due date will not be considered. Please send questions and completed proposals to the following:

#### **Project Contact**

Abby Powell

[apowell@ThriveInSPI.org](mailto:apowell@ThriveInSPI.org)

#### **Please CC:**

[broadband@ThriveInSPI.org](mailto:broadband@ThriveInSPI.org)

### Other Information

The Respondent should be aware that the information provided will be analyzed and may appear in various reports and/or requests, except for those parts of each response that may be denoted as Confidential.

The Respondent should carefully examine this RFI. It is the respondent's responsibility to become familiar with the proposed Service Sectors. It will be assumed that the respondent will have done such an inspection through examinations, inquiries, and investigations. Respondent shall address all items as specified in this RFI. Failure to address selected items may disqualify a Respondent from further consideration. Submission of a proposal shall constitute evidence that the respondent has made all the examinations mentioned above and is free of any uncertainty concerning conditions that would affect the execution and completion of this project.

The respondent shall be fully responsible for all costs incurred in the development and submission of the proposal and any other costs incurred before the issuance of a contract between the County and the Respondent. The County shall not assume any contractual obligation as a result of the issuance of a proposal request, the preparation or submission of a proposal, the evaluation of proposals, or the final



selection of a proposal.

The County shall not, in any way, be liable or responsible for disclosing any such records, or any parts thereof, if the disclosure is required or permitted under the Illinois Public Records Act or otherwise by law. A blanket statement of confidentiality or marking each submission page as confidential shall not be deemed sufficient notice of exception. Respondents must specifically label only those provisions of the offer which are “Confidential” in nature. If a Public Records request is submitted for a response that includes “confidential” materials, the respondent will be contacted to discuss the document's release.

The county will evaluate each respondent’s information to determine which respondents will support them during the BEAD process. The County will be the sole judge and have complete discretion in selecting the successful respondent(s). The County may reject any proposals, request modifications to proposals, request new proposals and request in-person or online interviews with one or more respondents.

All respondents to this RFI will be placed on a recipient list for any future solicitations issued by the County related to this RFI. The lack of a county response to this RFI will not disqualify any party from being considered for future solicitations.

## **5. CONTACT WITH SANGAMON COUNTY EMPLOYEES**

To ensure a fair and objective evaluation of all RFI responses, vendors must submit all inquiries to the Project Contact listed in Section 4 above. No other contact should be made with county employees unless the project contact approves it.

## **6. AUTHORITY**

This RFI is issued pursuant to applicable provisions of Illinois Law and Sangamon County Ordinances. Any contract resulting from this RFI shall be governed and construed according to the laws of the State of Illinois. The contracting parties shall agree that any dispute between parties will be resolved in the Sangamon County Circuit Court, said court to be the exclusive venue to resolve any dispute between the parties to the contract, and both parties further agreeing that said court shall have personal jurisdiction over them regarding all disputes involving the contract.

## **7. RFI RESPONSE FORMAT**

In order to facilitate a timely and fair evaluation of RFI proposals, a standard response format has been developed and is documented in this section. All Respondents are required to format their proposal in a manner consistent with the guidelines below:

<b>Section</b>	<b>Topic</b>
1	Letter of Transmittal
2	Executive Summary
3	Respondent Information
4	Engineering and ISP Services
5	Additional Information

## 8. SPECIFIC RESPONSES REQUIRED

### Letter of Transmittal

Please provide a one- or two-page transmittal letter with the following:

- A brief statement of the respondent's understanding of the proposed partnership; this should be no more than two pages.
- Highlights the respondent's qualifications and ability to perform the proposed solution.
- Provide the name, title, phone number, email address, and street address of the person(s) in the respondent's organization who will respond to questions about the RFI response.

### Executive Summary

Provide an executive summary (no more than two pages) that describes why the County should consider the respondent as a partner to serve the proposed Service Area(s) and that discusses the benefits of working with the respondent.

### Respondent Information

#### Company Overview

Provide an overview including the following information about the respondent:

- Company name, date established, number of employees, business address, phone number, and website.
- Other lines of business conducted by the respondent.
- Description of any recent mergers or acquisitions.
- Respondent should indicate the name, title, and contact information of the person who will be authorized to enter into an agreement with the County if selected.

#### Financial Viability

Please provide information to demonstrate the financial viability and stability of the ISP. If the ISP has declared bankruptcy within the last ten years, please describe the resolution of the bankruptcy. Describe any pending lawsuits related to the ISP business.

#### Experience

Describe the following:

- List all communities served in Illinois and other States where Respondent is an active retail ISP.
- List communities already served using the technology being proposed in your response.
- How many broadband customers does the respondent have in Illinois? In other states?
- How long has the respondent been serving customers in Illinois?
- How many employees does the respondent have in Illinois?

#### Matching Funds

Please provide an estimate of the full cost of building your proposed broadband solution for each sector. Describe the source and the amount of funding expected in addition to any funding provided by the County.



## Engineering and ISP Services

Overall Design Parameters. The ISP should describe its technical approach to bringing faster broadband to the serving area (s). Please provide a high-level overview of the following technical issues involved in bringing the proposed solution:

- What technology are you proposing?
- If a wired network, what mix of the aerial and buried plant are you proposing?
- Describe your design philosophy for determining the size of customer nodes and the expected oversubscription level.
- Provide information about key company personnel working on this project. Information should include a short resume, a description of each staff member's role, and their availability to work on this project.

Engineering Requirements. Please verify that you are ready and able to meet the following requirements to engineer the network in the proposed Service Area(s).

- A Professional Engineer licensed in Illinois shall approve all network designs.
- A new network should be designed to pass every home, business, and government location within a Sector.
- The network should be capable of delivering the speeds you are proposing.
- The network should be designed to continue providing the promised broadband speeds at the expected busy hours when the network carries the most local broadband traffic.
- Respondent should provide independent inspection of the construction process (meaning the inspectors are independent of and not employed by the respondent) so that the constructed network meets the design specification of the network. Please describe your proposed construction inspection process and the inspectors' functional independence.
- Respondent must certify that it will adhere to all local regulations concerning rights-of-way, permitting, and construction practices,
- Respondent must provide an electronic copy of the final construction / as-built drawings to the county to be approved by the county at the end of construction.

## Additional Information

### Details of Each Proposed Service Area

For each sector being proposed, provide the following details:

- An estimate of the number of passings covered.
- For wired networks, an estimate of the route miles that must be constructed.
- An estimated total construction budget is needed to bring broadband to each proposed sector.
- Shapefiles or a KMZ of the ISP's proposed project area(s).

### ISP Operations

The respondent should provide a high-level discussion describing how you will operate the ISP business. Please respond to the following questions and issues:

- What are the respondent's expectations regarding your achieved customer penetration rates by three after a grant award? By the fifth year?
- The County hopes for affordable broadband rates. Please describe your broadband products by speed and price for residents and businesses. Describe any additional products and rates for ancillary charges for modems, Wi-Fi routers, etc.

- The ISP must offer a reduced-cost broadband product to low-income homes that qualify for a discount. Please describe how you will provide a discount. Also, describe your plans if the federal government does not renew the Affordable Connectivity Program next year if that fund runs out of money.
- The County is hoping for a quality customer service experience for residents. Please answer the following questions along with any other information you care to provide about your customer service:
  - Where are your closest broadband customers to the county?
  - Where is the nearest office to the County that includes live customer service agents?
  - What's the location where calls from customers will be answered?
  - Where will the home base location be for any outside technicians assigned to the Service Area(s)?
- For a period starting with the execution of a contract with the County for this project and lasting until two years after completion of construction, the Respondent will not charge customers in the Service Area(s) any non-recurring charges to be connected to the network.

#### Proposed Schedule for Completing Construction

The Respondent should provide a timeline describing your best estimate of when any proposed network would be completed and ready to serve customers.

### **9. RIGHT OF REFUSAL**

Sangamon County reserves the right to reject all RFIs in their entirety or to select certain solutions from the RFIs. Sangamon County reserves the right to award the contract in any manner that complies with Illinois law and which it deems in the best interest of its citizens.

### **10. PAYMENT**

The County anticipates that any County grants will be paid to the respondent over time with proof of completed construction – similar to the method used to pay State broadband grants. The County and Respondent will enter into a contract defining the respondent's payment terms and deliverable obligations. Payment terms will be negotiated with each respondent.

As part of the process, the County will have a fiduciary role to make certain that the respondent is completing the needed work and is billing the County properly for the completed work. In response to this RFI, we'd like to hear about any concerns the Respondent has with this proposed process.

## Addendum A

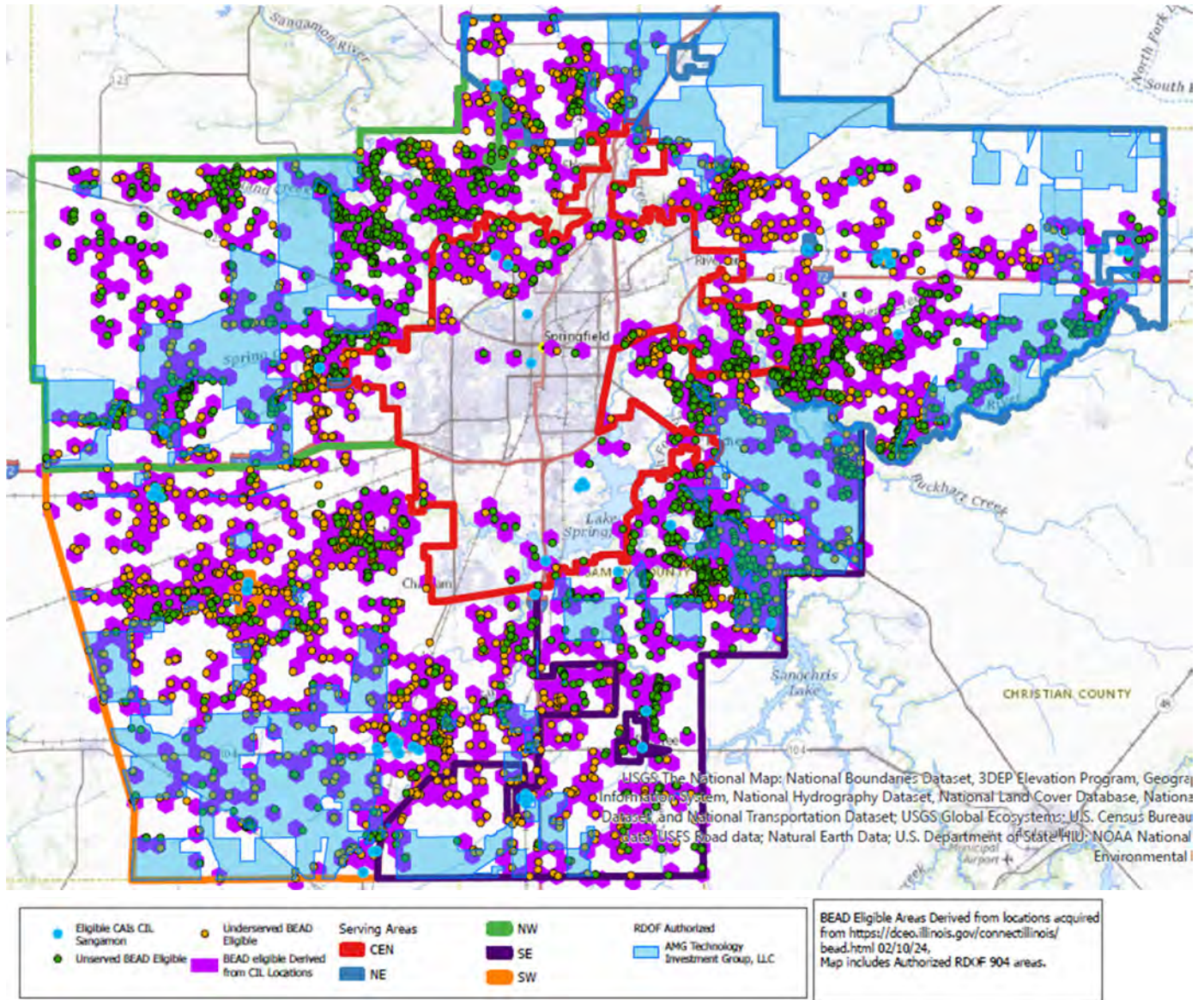
Please indicate your interest in serving each section by checking the percentage of each sector that most closely matches your proposal. For example, if you propose building roughly half of the Northeast Sector, check the 50% block under that Sector.

Also, if you are proposing a response for more than one sector, indicate your preference if the county were to award only a part of your proposal. Use '1' for your first preference, etc.

### Priority Ranking

<b>Northwest Sector</b>	_____	100% <input type="radio"/>	75% <input type="radio"/>	50% <input type="radio"/>	25% <input type="radio"/>
<b>Northeast Sector</b>	_____	100% <input type="radio"/>	75% <input type="radio"/>	50% <input type="radio"/>	25% <input type="radio"/>
<b>Southwest Sector</b>	_____	100% <input type="radio"/>	75% <input type="radio"/>	50% <input type="radio"/>	25% <input type="radio"/>
<b>Southeast Sector</b>	_____	100% <input type="radio"/>	75% <input type="radio"/>	50% <input type="radio"/>	25% <input type="radio"/>
<b>Central Sector</b>	_____	100% <input type="radio"/>	75% <input type="radio"/>	50% <input type="radio"/>	25% <input type="radio"/>

## Addendum B – BEAD Eligible Area



## **Addendum C**

The County can't yet make any promises, but it is working to make permitting and rights-of-way acquisition as easy as possible.

The County has several locations where it stores aggregate that can be made available to ISPs as lay-down yards for ISPs to store materials during construction.