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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Land of Sky Regional Council Delegates Unite to Back \$7.7M Digital Equity Grant for Helene Recovery

Asheville, NC | June 2025 — Land of Sky Regional Council’s Board of Delegates has unanimously passed a resolution in support of the *Connecting All Communities* grant, reinforcing the region’s commitment to closing the digital divide and accelerating recovery efforts following Hurricane Helene. The \$7.7 million federal grant—awarded in January 2025 to Land of Sky’s WestNGN program—was stripped away in April after the abrupt termination of the Digital Equity Act. This resolution marks a powerful stand from our local governments. “This unanimous resolution shows the strength of our regional collaboration. We are united in our belief that access and adoption to broadband is essential—not just for recovery from Hurricane Helene, but for the long-term health, opportunity, and resilience of our communities.” *Patrick Fitzsimmons, Town of Weaverville Mayor*

The project served over 18 counties in WNC and leveraged an additional \$1 million in matching funds from Dogwood Health Trust. Together, this investment would have jump-started digital opportunity programming across the region, bringing much-needed resources to communities that already lag behind in access and adoption. The focus is more than about internet access—it is about workforce retraining, remote education, telehealth, and digital safety. These are foundational tools for rural recovery, and our communities can’t afford to go without them. Hurricane Helene only made things worse. People lost jobs, services, and stability. This grant would have supported the recovery of Western North Carolina. “Internet access is just one piece of the puzzle,” said *Sara Nichols, Energy and Economic Development Program Manager at Land of Sky*. “A laptop is useless without a connection, and a connection is useless if you don’t know how to safely navigate the digital world. This funding was about building the full ecosystem our residents need to thrive. Pulling it back in the wake of a natural disaster is not just disappointing—it’s making our recovery journey harder.”

Our region is united in our belief that this investment is essential, and we’re not walking away from it. The grant partners elevated needs of rural citizens, veterans, and aging populations who struggle with the digital divide. “As we continue to work together and recover from Helene, Western North Carolina needs investment of resources, and it is incredibly disappointing that the federal government has chosen to cut more than \$7M that was desperately needed to continue getting our people connected to high-speed internet. Give up is not part of our mountain vocabulary, and we need others to stand with us and invest in our region and our people” *Terri Wells Buncombe County Commissioner*

Land of Sky Regional Council and our partners remain committed to ensuring every resident in Western North Carolina has the tools and access they need to participate in the modern economy. We are actively exploring all options to restore this critical funding.

For more information or to get involved in our digital equity efforts, contact Sara Nichols at sara@landofsky.org.



Resolution In Support of National Telecommunications and Information Administration Digital Equity Act in Western North Carolina

WHEREAS, access to high-speed internet, devices, digital literacy, and digital tools is no longer a luxury, but a necessity for participating in education, employment, healthcare, and civic life; and

WHEREAS, the digital divide continues to impact rural communities, low-income households, seniors, veterans, communities of color, individuals with disabilities, and others across Western North Carolina and the state at large; and

WHEREAS, the Digital Equity Act was enacted as part of the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), represents a historic and bipartisan commitment to closing the digital divide and ensuring every American has access to the tools and skills necessary to thrive in a modern economy; and

WHEREAS, the State of North Carolina was awarded \$22.4 million in Digital Equity Act Capacity Grant funding, which has supported foundational planning and collaborative efforts to address digital opportunities for all statewide, including in the Land of Sky region; and

WHEREAS, Land of Sky Regional Council was announced for \$7.7 million in DEA Competitive Grant funding to expand and implement strategic, community-led digital solutions for all across Western North Carolina for a \$9.1 million project; and

WHEREAS, these investments are essential to ensuring broadband adoption, improving digital literacy, expanding device access, supporting workforce development, and enabling community organizations to deliver critical services more effectively and for all;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Land of Sky Regional Council Board of Delegates:

1. Expresses its full support for the continued investment and reinstatement of Digital Equity Act Capacity Grant funding in North Carolina;
2. Supports NTIA and US Department of Commerce, US Congress, State of North Carolina, and other partners finding solutions for the \$7.7 million DEA Competitive Grant and \$22.4 million DEA Capacity Grant to come to Western North Carolina and North Carolina respectively to further expand digital opportunity for all efforts;
3. Recognizes the importance of sustained federal and state collaboration to ensure rural and underserved communities in Western North Carolina are not left behind in the digital age; and
4. Calls upon federal and state decision-makers to prioritize the allocation, protection, and effective deployment of Digital Equity Act funding as essential to economic development, educational opportunity, and community resilience for all across North Carolina.

Adopted this the 28th day of April, 2025.

Maureen Copelof

The Honorable Maureen Copelof, Vice Chair
Land of Sky Regional Council

Signature: Mayor Maureen Copelof

Mayor Maureen Copelof (Jun 11, 2025 15:16 EDT)

Email: maureen.copelof@cityofbrevard.com






LOSRC DEA Press Release FINAL

Final Audit Report

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