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PRESS RELEASE:

Peoples preparing to break ground on USDA ReConnect fiber project

Preparations are underway and approaching the construction phase for broadband deployment in an unserved area in Wood County east of the Wood County Airport. At this time, all engineering design has been completed and is currently in the bidding process. “We are eagerly awaiting the final materials to break ground on this project,” reports Steven Steele, GM/CEO Peoples Telephone Coop. With any fiber construction project, materials management is a challenge but with the continued shortages resulting from the pandemic, it is even more challenging.

In February 2020, Peoples was named a recipient of a grant as part of the USDA ReConnect Pilot Program. Through this program Peoples will invest \$4 million, \$3 million in ReConnect grant funding and \$1 million internally funded, to deploy 53.7 miles of fiber-optic cable in specific unserved areas near Lake Bob Sandlin in Camp County and near Wood County Airport in Wood County Texas.

Research that correlates fiber availability and economic development are overwhelming. Each foot of fiber deployed by Peoples will in turn have an impact on Wood County residents and the economy. Lee Smith, Chairman of the Wood County Economic Development Commission’s, WCEDC, Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, acknowledges that the commission has received recommendations for county wide broadband coverage. Smith stated, “Consistent with the committee’s mission ‘to improve Wood County’s quality of life by promoting economic development by promoting infrastructure’, broadband deployment for all has our highest priority and wholehearted support of today’s announcement knowing that completion of the RUS project will provide the jumping off point for Peoples to provide the Wood County Airport with first class broadband access.”

This is a great opportunity for Peoples provided by the USDA and the Rural Utilities Service, RUS. “We appreciate their partnership,” says Steele. “This project would not have been possible at this time without it.” While this project is not directly connecting the airport in the initial build out phase, it will bring fiber optics within the serviceable vicinity supporting the WCEDC’s strategic growth goals. Airport board member Dr. John Wisdom says, “Currently the DSL internet options at the Wood County Airport have been maximized and do not meet the needs for future growth at the facility. Bringing in fiber and high-speed connectivity will have a major economic impact for the area by improving job creation at the airport. We have lost several investors who did not build at the airport because they were not able to meet communication needs.”

Program Background:

In March 2018, Congress provided \$600 million to USDA to expand broadband infrastructure and services in rural America. On Dec. 13, 2018, Secretary Perdue announced the rules of the program, called “[ReConnect](#),” including how the loans and grants will be awarded to help build broadband infrastructure in rural America. USDA received 146 applications between May 31, 2019, and July 12, 2019, requesting \$1.4 billion in funding across all three ReConnect Program funding products including 100 percent loan, 100 percent grant, and loan-grant combinations.

These grants, loans and combination funds enable the federal government to partner with the private sector and rural communities to build modern broadband infrastructure in areas with insufficient internet service.

USDA Rural Development provides loans and grants to help expand economic opportunities and create jobs in rural areas. This assistance supports infrastructure improvements; business development; housing; community facilities such as schools, public safety and health care; and high-speed internet access in rural areas. For more information, visit www.rd.usda.gov.

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