

Drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots launch statewide push for universal public access broadband

Public-private partnerships seek to bridge “digital divide” by providing free broadband access to all through community drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots

OLYMPIA, WA – The Washington State Broadband Office estimates over 300 new drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots are coming online statewide through an initiative to bring free public broadband internet access to all residents. Partners in the state’s drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots project include: Washington State University; Washington State Library, part of the Washington Office of the Secretary of State; members of the Washington Public Utility Districts Association (WPUDA) and affiliated nonprofit Northwest Open Access Network (NoaNet); the Washington State Broadband Office; Washington Independent Telecommunications Association (WITA); Washington Technology Solutions (WaTech); and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). Microsoft and the Avista Foundation are providing funding, and the federal Information Technology Disaster Resource Center contributed equipment and installation.

To date, 140 of the new drive-in hotspots are operational, in addition to 301 existing Washington State Library hotspots identified across the state. All told, some 600 public hotspots will soon be available to keep Washington communities connected.

For complete information and a map of locations, visit www.driveinwifi.wa.gov. The [map](#) will be updated as more sites come online.

Launching primarily as parking lot hotspots in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the free community Wi-Fi is accessible regardless of how users arrive at the locations. Some sites also offer indoor public access during business hours. Everyone using the sites – outside or inside - must practice social distancing and hygiene precautions, including staying in your vehicle or at least six feet from other users and wearing a mask if necessary.

Each hotspot will have its own security protocol. Some will be open and others will have Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) safe security installed.

“Access to broadband was a challenge for many Washingtonians before COVID-19. This rapid, collaborative response is an essential immediate solution but we cannot stop here,” Gov. Jay Inslee said. “I’ve long advocated for greater access to quality and affordable broadband for all Washingtonians, and will continue to do so long after this virus is behind us. We thank all of the state and private partners that have stepped up

to ensure people are connected today, and look forward to their continued partnership in maintaining that access into the future.”

Bridging the Digital Divide

The coronavirus pandemic prompted a surge in ongoing efforts to bridge the digital divide between those who do and do not have access to high-speed internet connections necessary for distance learning, remote work, telemedicine and day-to-day essential services.

“Depending on where you live, some seniors can’t refill prescriptions, furloughed workers can’t apply for unemployment benefits, small businesses can’t access financial assistance, and students can’t do their homework,” said Commerce Director Lisa Brown. “It is absolutely essential to make broadband universally available to strengthen communities throughout the state.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic is shining a bright light on what was already a significant challenge for the state - delivering ubiquitous, scalable broadband connectivity to all Washington citizens and businesses. This crisis has fueled the energy around seeing these deliverables come to fruition as broadband is no longer a luxury, but critical infrastructure for all,” said Washington State Broadband Office Director Russ Elliott.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal agrees with this sentiment. In an April press conference with Gov. Inslee, Reykdal compared broadband connectivity to utilities like water and power.

“Access to internet is an equity issue for our students and educators, and it is intensified by this crisis,” Reykdal said. “I am proud of the work to bring connectivity to our communities, and I will continue challenging our public and private partners to break down systemic barriers so all of our students and educators have access to learn and connect using online tools.”

Libraries across the state have also been integral to the project, turning their Wi-Fi capacity towards their parking lots to ensure patrons can remain connected to libraries’ digital resources.

“Our longstanding mission at the State Library has been to build prosperous and informed communities by providing technology, access to information, resources, and professional support,” said Secretary of State Kim Wyman, whose office oversees the Washington State Library. “It was natural for our office to partner with other agencies and organizations on this endeavor to ensure Washingtonians can continue to access a variety of critical information, even during this pandemic.”

Partnering for public access

Genesis of the state drive-in hotspot project came from Dr. Andre-Denis Wright, dean of WSU’s College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sciences, which includes the WSU Extension program. WSU Extension sites will host community public access hotspots in every county in Washington state, with some counties benefiting from multiple extension locations <https://go.wsu.edu/findwifi>.

“As a Land-Grant university, we saw a way to use the statewide reach of our extension offices to support the expansion and rapid deployment of publicly accessible

broadband service where it's needed most," said Dr. Wright. "Perhaps most importantly, not only does this help students who have had to transition to online learning but provides critical access to healthcare and improved well-being for all residents of these rural and underserved parts of the state."

Several of the state's public utility districts and rural service providers were among the first to step up and use their existing fiber networks to establish Wi-Fi hotspots for public connectivity. Public Wi-Fi hotspots are active today in Chelan, Clallam, Jefferson, Franklin, Mason, Grant, Pacific, Benton and Pend Oreille counties with dozens more planned to include Kitsap, Lewis, Okanogan and Grays Harbor. The PUD-owned telecom nonprofit [NoaNet](#) has partnered with the State Broadband Office as an information clearinghouse. It reports 140 active sites and at least 60 more activating soon, with more than 70 additional drive-in Wi-Fi hotspot sites planned throughout the state.

"In today's world, Internet access is a critical service. 20 years ago, PUDs founded NoaNet, which is a nonprofit organization that specifically focuses getting broadband access out to rural Washington communities. It is natural that the PUDs and NoaNet are stepping up to ensure Washington communities have access to broadband as an economic and educational lifeline during the Covid-19 pandemic," said NoaNet CEO Dave Spencer.

"Almost 100 years ago PUDs were created by their communities to provide essential public services. In the midst of this crisis, PUDs are once again focusing on meeting needs by ensuring citizens have access to the broadband service necessary to support the health and welfare of their families and their communities," said WPUDA Executive Director George Caan.

Broadband equity is not just a rural challenge. The drive-In Wi-Fi hotspot project addresses underserved and economically disadvantaged communities in urban and suburban areas as well.

Funding broadband as critical infrastructure

The State Broadband Office is collaborating with the Washington State Public Works Board to administer approximately \$21 million in state funding approved for broadband expansion to rural communities long term. In addition, \$250,000 was approved from the state Disaster Response Account to support this rapid deployment of the drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots to aid compliance with Gov. Inslee's Stay Home, Stay Healthy order.

The drive-in Wi-Fi project is also funded in part through a donation by [Microsoft's Airband Initiative](#), which was launched in 2017 to expand access to broadband in rural communities across America. During the COVID-19 crisis, the Airband Initiative has worked with partners across the country to deploy hundreds of Wi-Fi hotspots to support education and telemedicine.

"COVID-19 has exacerbated the impact of the broadband gap, preventing communities from accessing online learning, telework, telemedicine, and other necessary parts of life during this crisis," said Shelley McKinley, Microsoft vice president of technology and corporate responsibility. "Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, Microsoft's Airband Initiative has been working with partners across the country to help address the

immediate broadband needs of communities, and we're glad to continue that work here in our home state of Washington."

The Avista Foundation, which provides funding to non-profit organizations addressing the needs of communities and citizens served by Spokane-based Avista, also contributed to the Drive-In Wi-Fi Project.

"We are pleased to help fund this effort toward bringing connectivity solutions to 13 rural sites throughout our eastern Washington service territory," said Kristine Meyer, executive director of the Avista Foundation. "An opportunity like this aligns well with the Avista Foundation's three key areas of focus: education, community vitality, and service to vulnerable populations."

Visit the Washington State Broadband Office website for more information about the state's broadband expansion program at www.broadband.wa.gov. Follow #WADriveInWiFi on social media.

