

# COMMUNICATIONS

## Tri-County Telephone Association COUNCIL GROVE, KANSAS

For many years now, rural Americans have struggled to live without high-speed internet. The problem reached a tipping point just as the global pandemic spread nationwide. In early 2020, estimates show approximately 14.5 million people—or nearly one-fourth of all rural residents—lacked broadband service at the speeds they needed to work remotely, learn from home or access telehealth services.

That's when Tri-County Telephone Association, a cooperative that provides broadband voice and video services, stepped into the picture. Securing new grants made possible under the U.S. government's CARES Act, TCT came to the rescue of two small Kansas towns starved for speedy internet. "In both cases, results have been memorable and even life-changing," said Dale Jones, the co-op's longtime CEO.

"There's definitely a pride factor in bringing high-speed broadband to underserved, small-town communities," Jones said. "At the end of the day, TCT had the ability and resources to deliver for our neighbors as promised, within tight time constraints while following safety precautions due to COVID-19. It's an accomplishment that makes us proud of our employees' efforts, and proud to live and work in rural America, too."

TCT's first construction project funded by the CARES Act involved a 2020 fiber network build in Alta Vista, Kansas, located 15 miles north of the utility's Council Grove headquarters. Thanks to the project, which was fast-tracked and completed over three snowy winter months, a local

elementary school, a health clinic and dozens of people working from home today benefit from faster-than-ever internet speeds of up to 1 megabit (MBPs).

High-speed internet had also been a sought-after service in Hillsboro, 50 miles north of Wichita. Several years ago, its mayor asked TCT to address his top concern, a severe lack of broadband. In early 2021, Hillsboro authorized and "rolled out the red carpet" for TCT to construct and deliver a fast, 100% fiber service, Jones said; it was completed at the end of 2021.

For the Alta Vista and Hillsboro projects, TCT worked with CoBank to finance credit facilities, pay off existing RUS debt, and provide added delayed draw and revolver capacity. With positive momentum underway, TCT expects CoBank to play a valuable, long-term role as finance partner in the co-op's quest to bring much-needed broadband to additional rural communities in the Sunflower State, said Jason Pettit, TCT controller.

"Ultimately, we chose CoBank as our lending institution because they're so collaborative and easy to do business with," Pettit said. "They've helped our team push past the paperwork, keep our business plans in line and streamline things so we could get our work done in a timely manner. For all those reasons, they've become true 'partners' in every sense of the word."



**1 JASON PETTIT**  
Controller  
Tri-County Telephone  
Association

**2 DALE JONES**  
CEO  
Tri-County Telephone  
Association

**3 ANDY SMITH**  
Managing Director  
CoBank

