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Utilizing an existing parking lot and green space adjacent to the Jackson County Library, Newport has created a Wi-Fi park, a place where residents with limited or no access to the internet can take advantage of free, high-speed broadband.

Overcoming the digital divide: Newport develops its first Wi-Fi park

By Michael Hudson

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Arkansans were left wondering how they would stay connected to school, work and one another while functioning remotely. Citizens had to contend with a lack of broadband infrastructure, especially in rural parts of the state. According to research conducted by Broadband Now (www.broadbandnow.com), Arkansas currently ranks 49th among states in their annual rankings of internet coverage, speed and availability. Federal Communications Commission data shows that less than 21.5 percent of an estimated 1.7 million Arkansas households have adequate internet access.

The pandemic put a spotlight on the need for more advanced technological infrastructure across the state and the city of Newport was no exception. The Newport Economic Development Commission (NEDC) understood that their city was at the forefront of this challenge and began to advocate for better access and identify ways

to support citizens in overcoming the digital divide, said Executive Director Jon Chadwell. “There are many in our community who do not have adequate access to broadband internet. Our staff and partners felt this was a critical issue for us to address.”

The NEDC identified a first step in overcoming the challenge: the development of DTech Park in downtown Newport and subsequent development of a Wi-Fi park. DTech Park is a public-private partnership focused on creating a high-tech environment that will produce high-demand job opportunities in northeast Arkansas. During the planning phase for the project, the NEDC partnered with the Jackson County Library to strengthen their Wi-Fi signal to reach into the parking lot area of the park. The NEDC then leveraged funding from a pandemic preparedness grant to begin construction on the official Wi-Fi park, located between the library and DTech Park.

The Wi-Fi park consists of 41 parking spaces, four accessible parking spaces and four green spaces that include trees and picnic tables. There are also plans to include spaces for electric vehicle charging. Internet access for the park is fully funded by the Newport Rotary Club, so citizens receive service with no additional cost to the city or NEDC.

Safety was also a priority, Chadwell said. “We partnered with Entergy Arkansas to install two pedestrian lights so that those who work early in the morning or into evening feel safe.” The park doesn’t yet include charging stations for laptops, phones and other electronic devices while sitting in the outdoor spaces, but NEDC and their partners are brainstorming ways to offer this service, likely by routing electrical outlets from the pedestrian lights to the picnic tables.

For communities interested in creating their own Wi-Fi park, Chadwell suggested starting with an already existing parking lot. He recommended that the space consist of an area where individuals can access the internet from either their vehicle or from outdoor seating, preferably both. The parking lot itself does not have to be paved, but a paved lot is preferred so that those with mobility issues are able to access the amenity. Additionally, preparing a well-lit space will allow further utilization of the park before sunrise or after hours.

“Get with local partners and the people who supply your broadband,” Chadwell recommended. “Partnering with local businesses and organizations not only creates shared workload and decreases costs but also creates opportunity to accomplish more in a shorter amount of time and for the community to come together to support a common goal.”

The digital divide is nothing new; COVID-19 only heightened our awareness of it. Creating digital equity and inclusion for all Arkansans is critical as we look to stay economically competitive and improve the quality of life in our communities. Through assessing community needs and creating and implementing plans to fulfill those needs, communities like Newport are preparing themselves for a bright and prosperous future.

To learn more about the DTech Park and the Newport Wi-Fi park, contact the Newport Economic Development Commission at www.newportarcity.org/economic-development or visit www.dtechpark.com.



Michael Hudson is the project coordinator for the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED). Learn more about CCED at www.uca.edu/cced.

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