



# Connect Marion

*A project to aid the ongoing efforts of enhancing and promoting internet connectivity throughout Marion and the surrounding county.*

**Lucy Besch**

**Devin Kodsi**

**Mithul Nallaka**

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## **Executive Summary**

Connect Marion aims to support ongoing initiatives to bring better broadband to Marion by helping E-Footprints, a Pelham based technology company, work towards additional sources of funding for their planned broadband project in Perry County as well as by collecting and submitting relevant comments from community members to the Federal Communications Commission about the current state of broadband in Marion and Perry County. Connect Marion aims to have all research work done before the beginning of May and collect and submit community comments during our time in Marion; we will measure our success by the number of research tasks we are able to successfully complete for E-Footprints as well as the number of quality, relevant community comments we are able to submit to the FCC.

Better broadband is an important step along the way to further economic development in Perry County, and it would afford many more opportunities to the county's residents both personally and professionally. Connect Marion is made up of students in the University Fellows Experience at the University of Alabama who are passionate about doing what we can to support these ongoing initiatives; we hope to make a positive contribution towards the end goal of improved broadband access in Perry County.

## **Project Summary**

### **Needs Addressed/History**

Broadband and internet connectivity are both essential aspects of our society, allowing its members to contribute, work, and connect to their communities and the world. Globally, the number of users on the internet increased from 413 million in 2000 to over 3.4 billion in 2016,

where the United States had 245 million individuals online in 2016/2017.<sup>1</sup> However, it is an unfortunate reality that several cities and surrounding areas across our nation and world have limited access to this modern-day necessity. According to the recent census data from 2019, 23% of US residents lack a wired broadband connection, and it is more than 35% for households that earn less than \$20,000 each year.<sup>2</sup> This issue can be seen in the state of Alabama, where approximately 3.3 million residents did not use the internet at broadband speeds in 2018. Unfortunately, this trend is especially prevalent in the city of Marion and the surrounding Perry County, where this county has the least access to high-speed internet out of the entire state. In 2018, approximately 5% of residents in Perry County had high-speed internet service at home, which was adequate for video conferencing and video streaming. The high rate of poverty in the county (80%) allowed the district to provide each student with a device through an Apple iPad Grant. Yet, in 2020, around 20% of students in the county did not have access to the internet at home for such technologies.<sup>3</sup> Commissioner Hudson has stated how it might cost the city of Marion \$30 to \$40 million to lay the proper infrastructure for its development, but he has also

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<sup>1</sup> Roser, Max, et al. *Internet*. 14 July 2015,

[ourworldindata.org/internet#:~:text=Globally%20the%20number%20of%20internet,from%20each%20country%20are%20online%3F](https://ourworldindata.org/internet#:~:text=Globally%20the%20number%20of%20internet,from%20each%20country%20are%20online%3F).

<sup>2</sup> Chris Shelton and Angela Siefer, opinion contributors. "Many Americans Still Don't Have Internet Access - Congress Should Help." *TheHill*, The Hill, 28 Oct. 2020,

[thehill.com/opinion/technology/523179-many-americans-still-dont-have-internet-access-congress-should-help#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20most%20recent,it%27s%20more%20than%2035%20percent.&amp;p;text=All%20communities%20need%20affordable%20access,recover%20from%20this%20economic%20disaster](https://thehill.com/opinion/technology/523179-many-americans-still-dont-have-internet-access-congress-should-help#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20most%20recent,it%27s%20more%20than%2035%20percent.&amp;p;text=All%20communities%20need%20affordable%20access,recover%20from%20this%20economic%20disaster).

<sup>3</sup> "In Rural Alabama, Pandemic Highlights Need For Broadband Access." *WBHM* 90.3, 1 May 2020, [wbhm.org/feature/2020/rural-alabama-pandemic-highlights-need-broadband-access/](https://wbhm.org/feature/2020/rural-alabama-pandemic-highlights-need-broadband-access/).

conveyed the lack of interest from other local officials to aid the pressing issue of broadband connectivity. It can be noted that Governor Kay Ivey announced 20 grants that totaled more than \$9.5 million for increasing broadband access in March of 2020. However, none of these grants applied to Perry County, emphasizing the inaction of the local and state governments to mitigate this problem for this rural community.<sup>4</sup> Community leaders in Marion, such as Mr. Bennett of Main Street Marion and Mrs. Ford of Sowing Seeds of Hope, have emphasized the vast importance and need for adequate internet access in the city and surrounding areas. As Mr. Bennett stated, “the enhancement of broadband would ensure Marion’s economic development and growth,” as it is an essential aspect of our modern world.

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<sup>4</sup> swhites-koditschek@al.com, Sarah Whites-Koditschek | “Alabama's Digital Divide More Pronounced in Pandemic.” *AI*, 18 Apr. 2020, [www.al.com/news/2020/04/with-limited-internet-rural-alabama-grows-more-remote-in-pandemic.html](http://www.al.com/news/2020/04/with-limited-internet-rural-alabama-grows-more-remote-in-pandemic.html).

## Mission, Vision, and Values Statements

### **Mission Statement**

Connecting Marion with the greater world to discover new business and personal opportunities through supporting existing developmental efforts to increase broadband access.

### **Mission Review**

The goal of Connect Marion is to support existing community efforts and create awareness for the necessity of broadband improvement throughout the city. Through talking to community members, the lack of internet and broadband access has been a serious impediment to the future development of Marion as a whole. Connect Marion's efforts involve supporting E-Footprints' efforts to bring broadband access to Marion through pop-up towers and collecting statements from local community members and leaders to submit to the FCC to aid future development.

### **Vision Statement**

We envision a future Marion much like that of Mr. Donald Bennett, a thriving and growing community with the infrastructure to support future growth. Through increased broadband access, we envision new business and economic opportunities. In addition, we envision an increased connection to the greater world, once again supporting future opportunities and bridging the educational, economic, and infrastructural gaps, hindering Marion's development.

## Values Statement

We value supporting existing efforts as well as creating new opportunities for Marion to accelerate its growth. Supporting the goals and experience of local community members is Connect Marion's main goal. Because of the limited scope of our reach and influence, Connect Marion hopes to bridge opportunities between larger organizations to develop new possibilities for growth. Overall, Connect Marion deeply values sharing community experience to support future efforts to improve broadband access in Marion.



## Project Narrative

### **The Team**

The Connect Marion group consists of the following:

- Lucy Besch, majoring in Economics and International Studies
- Mithul Nallaka, majoring in Computer Science & Biochemistry
- Devin Kodsi, majoring in Aerospace Engineering & Physics

The members of this project group are a part of the 14th cohort of the University Fellows Experience at the University of Alabama.

### **The Proposition**

Connect Marion will aim to aid the ongoing efforts of enhancing and promoting broadband connectivity within Marion and Perry County through two actions. One, the group will be working with local service provider E-Footprints in their attempts to implement a long-term plan to increase broadband connection in the surrounding area. This organization has submitted its proposed plan, titled the Perry County Alabama Broadband Initiative, to the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA's) Broadband Accessibility Fund. While E-Footprints is waiting to hear back about the approval of their application, the group will aid their efforts by researching additional sources for possible funding for their project. These additional funding sources could include the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Delta Regional Authority. The "for-profit" nature of E-Footprints prevents them from applying for funds from such organizations, but non-profit institutions within Marion could apply and provide these funds for the Perry County Alabama Broadband Initiative. Thus, this aspect of the project will focus on providing the necessary information to Marion non-profit

organizations so that they can apply for such funds. The second aspect of this project applies to more of the promotion side of broadband connectivity. Specifically, the partners of the group will be collecting statements from various Marion and Perry County community members about the issues with internet connection in the area. The Federal Communications Commission's website contains a page where individuals can submit their issues with internet/broadband in their communities along with their personal information. This allows the FCC to paint a better picture of areas in the US where there is possible internet "dead-spots." An individual has the option to write a short statement of their issues on this webpage or submit any files such as recordings. With the permission of each community member to share their personal information, Connect Marion intends to collect as many statements as possible to bring the internet issues of the community to light to the FCC. This project hopes that these actions will continue the push for an enhancement of broadband in rural areas, motivating both local and state leaders to make a beneficial change for the residents over which they govern.

### **Goals to Achieve**

Connect Marion aims to achieve two major goals. One of these goals entails the completion of research work to assist ongoing efforts to procure further funding for a broadband project in Perry County. The other goal entails the successful collection of relevant broadband-related comments from Marion and Perry County residents and submission of these comments to the Federal Communications Commission. Connect Marion will measure its success in completing the first goal with the amount of research that is able to be provided to community partners in a useful format and the satisfaction of the community partners with this work. The success of the second goal will be measured by how many relevant comments are successfully

sent into the FCC comment section, as well as how closely the information gathered aligns with what the FCC deems useful to their purposes and desires to get out of the comment section.

### **The Need for the Work**

As previously mentioned through the history/needs addressed section of the Connect Marion action plan, broadband connectivity is an extremely important issue throughout our nation. In the modern era, internet connectivity has become an essential aspect of everyday life. For instance, according to data gathered by the Pew Research Center, half of all American adults were already online in early 2000. This number has increased to 93% of American adults today, where the number of American adults with high-speed broadband service has drastically increased between 2000 and 2010.<sup>5</sup> However, access to broadband is unfortunately limited due to differing societal contexts, disproportionately affecting individuals of certain demographics and racial groups. Specifically, those who classify as African American are far less likely than whites to say that they have a broadband connection at home. In 2021, only 71% of African Americans stated that they had access to broadband, as compared to 80% of Caucasians in the U.S. Even more, in the same year, 59% of those with a high school diploma or less said that they had access to broadband, differing drastically with the same statement for 94% of college graduates.<sup>6</sup> An

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<sup>5</sup> “Demographics of Internet and Home Broadband Usage in the United States.” Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, Pew Research Center, 14 Apr. 2021, [www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/?menuItem=3109350c-8dba-4b7f-ad52-a3e976ab8c8f](http://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/?menuItem=3109350c-8dba-4b7f-ad52-a3e976ab8c8f).

<sup>6</sup> “Demographics of Internet and Home Broadband Usage in the United States.” *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, Pew Research Center, 14 Apr. 2021, [www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/?menuItem=89fe9877-d6d0-42c5-bca0-8e6034e300aa](http://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/?menuItem=89fe9877-d6d0-42c5-bca0-8e6034e300aa).

even clearer picture can be painted when contrasting broadband and internet connections within urban and rural areas. Studies have demonstrated that rural areas have much slower internet access as compared to their counterparts. Specifically, while 4% of residents in urban centers lack access to 25/4 Mbps broadband, 39% of rural residents lack access to this type of broadband. This truly prevents rural residents from taking advantage of an essential aspect of modern-day life, creating a vast digital divide within our nation.<sup>7</sup> Stemming from these concepts, it can be seen that these types of internet-based inequalities can be found within the state of Alabama. The state itself ranks 38th in the U.S. in terms of state broadband access, where approximately 475,000 individuals in Alabama do not have access to wired broadband 25 Mbps or faster. These figures can be emphasized within the rural regions of the state, where the population of Perry County has less than 1% access to a wired connection of 25 Mbps speeds.<sup>8</sup> This fact emphasizes the statistic demonstrated in the needs addressed/history section, where the entirety of Perry County was ranked lowest in terms of broadband access throughout the entire state. The drastic comparison truly highlights the digital divide between rural and urban communities and thus the need to expand this service to these communities. This internet disparity can have a variety of effects on the county's residents, where 20% of students in the county do not have access to the internet at home. Especially during the era of the pandemic, access to the internet at home for students is extremely important to allow for the continuation of

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<sup>7</sup> West, Darrell M., and Jack Karsten. "Rural and Urban America Divided by Broadband Access." Brookings, Brookings, 29 July

2016, [www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2016/07/18/rural-and-urban-america-divided-by-broadband-access/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2016/07/18/rural-and-urban-america-divided-by-broadband-access/).

<sup>8</sup> "Internet Access in Alabama: Stats & Figures." BroadbandNow, 12 Apr. 2021, [broadbandnow.com/Alabama](http://broadbandnow.com/Alabama).

learning. This past March, the governor of the state of Alabama announced 20 grants that totaled more than \$9.5 million for Alabama communities for increasing broadband access. These funds came from Alabama’s Broadband Accessibility Fund of the Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA), a fund founded in 2018 to enhance the quality of broadband connections throughout the state. However, none of the 20 grants applied to Perry County and its residents, emphasizing the fact that there is little motivation to improve access to broadband within certain rural Alabama communities.<sup>9</sup> Talks with various community members and leaders of both Perry County and the city of Marion have allowed for the development of a better understanding of the state of internet connectivity and the essentiality of its expansion. For one, Dr. Smiley of the Perry County School Districts stated how the schools have been able to deal with the transition to online learning well during the COVID pandemic. Students already had access to technology at home due to the Apple ConnectEd Grant Program, which provided all 800 students of Francis Marion School with iPads in 2016 to combat the grip of poverty on the region.<sup>10</sup> In addition, she stated how the school district equipped several school busses with Wi-Fi signals to enhance the signal for various students during the day.<sup>11</sup> However, while these solutions are able to resolve the brunt of the issues relating to internet connectivity, they only

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<sup>9</sup> swhites-koditschek@al.com, Sarah Whites-Koditschek | “Alabama’s Digital Divide More Pronounced in Pandemic.” *AI*, 18 Apr. 2020, [www.al.com/news/2020/04/with-limited-internet-rural-alabama-grows-more-remote-in-pandemic.html](http://www.al.com/news/2020/04/with-limited-internet-rural-alabama-grows-more-remote-in-pandemic.html).

<sup>10</sup> March 17, 2016 at 3:42 AM CDT - Updated July 2 at 8:00 AM, et al. “Hundreds of Marion Students & Teachers Receive iPads to Enhance Curriculum.” *Https://Wwww.wsfa.com*, 25 Mar. 2016, [www.wsfa.com/story/31491087/hundreds-of-marion-students-teachers-receive-ipads-to-enhance-curriculum/](http://www.wsfa.com/story/31491087/hundreds-of-marion-students-teachers-receive-ipads-to-enhance-curriculum/).

<sup>11</sup> Smiley, Marcia. Interview. 22 Mar. 2021.

represent short-term solutions for a deeply-rooted problem, one that will ultimately require a long-term solution on a county-wide scale. Further meetings with other community leaders have additionally aided an understanding of the need for an improved broadband connection. Mrs. Frances Ford of Sowing Seeds of Hope shared information relating to this need in the community, stating how they have been able to help children with online school by providing various resources for them. Many children, despite having access to technology at home, are not able to connect to an adequate internet signal. Mrs. Ford's organization allows these kids in need to complete their online homework in SSOH's facility through computers and an increased internet signal, in addition to helping these children work in less distracting contexts.<sup>12</sup> Mr. Donald Bennett of Main Street Marion has been an important source of information to understand the need for broadband connectivity throughout the region. Mr. Bennett illustrated the main issues caused by a lack of internet connection, such as blocking access to an adequate level of education, affecting the senior members of the community, and stagnating business growth opportunities for Marion. Unfortunately, due to Marion's small-town stature, they do not have enough population for service providers to justify enhancing broadband in the surrounding area. Even more, since Perry County is a poor region, they simply do not have the proper resources or funds to carry out and contribute to a broadband expansion project.<sup>13</sup> He continuously stated the benefits of enhanced internet connection, emphasizing that there is ultimately no growth without broadband. In his words, it is something that ties into every aspect of a town in modern day and is one of the core infrastructures pieces of any successful area.

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<sup>12</sup> Ford, Frances. Interview. 27 Jan. 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett, Donald. Interview. 26 Feb. 2021.

Without an enhanced internet connection, Marion simply will not be able to develop as a city and community.<sup>14</sup>

### Preparation

Connect Marion has been closely involved in both supporting E-Footprints as well as developing materials for collecting comments for the FCC. In working with E-Footprints, Connect Marion has been able to conduct research regarding possible grants to pursue to supplement the broadband initiative grant from ADECA. These possible funding sources involved the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Delta Regional Authority. While Perry County lies slightly out of the designated area for the Appalachian Regional Commission, Connect Marion has researched possible ways to contact individuals involved to reconsider Perry County's eligibility. However, as discussed earlier, E-Footprint's "for-profit" nature requires them to have a proxy in Marion. As such, the group members spoke with Mr. Bennett, who informed them that there are several organizations in Marion, such as Main Street Marion, Sowing Seeds of Hope, and even Horseshow Farms that would be willing to support E-Footprint's efforts in obtaining additional funding.

In developing the aspect of Connect Marion dealing with FCC comments, the group has prepared both a poster and possible interview questions to ask both community leaders and individuals throughout Marion. Connect Marion hopes to reach a wide audience of individuals throughout Marion to collect a clear understanding of the state of broadband access in the city. This information will then be submitted to the FCC and possibly used for future development

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<sup>14</sup> Bennett, Donald. Interview. 26 Mar. 2021.

purposes. The possible interview questions were designed to obtain the most amount of information possible based on the experiences of Marion residents, and the poster offers more information about what the FCC comment section is about, its purpose, and how Marion residents can take part. The poster and the possible interview questions can be found in the appendix.

### **Partners and Contacts**

The development of Connect Marion has been tightly interconnected with the discussions with various community partners in Marion as well as campus partners. Connect Marion began after an initial discussion with Mrs. Francis Ford of Sowing Seeds of Hope. She explained how the lack of general broadband access throughout Marion has made it very difficult for Marion citizens to find opportunities. She continued that even at the Sowing Seeds of Hope office, their access to internet was limited. This then led to the continuation of discovering how exactly the state of broadband access in Marion was impacting its development and how Connect Marion could help. As discussed previously, a significant step forward for Connect Marion was our meeting with Mr. Donald Bennett. Mr. Bennett made it vividly clear that the current state of broadband in Marion was one of the key factors in hindering its development. He spoke of possible manufacturing plants that could not operate on Marion's current internet access and even of how small coffee shops suffer from a lack of traffic because they can not offer free Wi-Fi to local students as a means to attract more business. It was during our initial meeting with Mr. Bennett that we learned of existing efforts in Marion to improve broadband access with a company called E-Footprints. Mr. Bennett let us know that E-Footprints aimed to improve general internet access in Marion by implementing "pop-up towers" as a mean to bridge the current gaps in access. This involved funding through an ADECA broadband initiative as well as



other sources. This then began a line of communication with E-Footprints itself, allowing us to understand better what E-Footprint's goals were and how we could help them achieve those goals. In doing so, we were met with the obstacle described in the previous section. E-Footprint's "for-profit" nature barred them from receiving some grants. As such, they asked Connect Marion to investigate involving local Marion groups to approach funding sources such as the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Delta Regional Authority. Throughout several weeks, we conducted research for E-Footprints and learned that various Marion entities would be willing to support E-Footprint's efforts in this regard. Our final point of contact in the Marion community was with Dr. Smiley, the superintendent of Perry County Schools. She told us about how the Apple ConnectEd grant had been a crucial part in bridging the existing gaps in Marion's technology and internet access, but she spoke to the fact that it was not a complete solution. She highlighted the existence of dead zones through Marion and Perry County that could not get any internet access through provided hotspots. Throughout developing Connect Marion, we also worked with various campus partners such as Dr. Patton and Dr. Payne-Foster. In speaking with Dr. Patton, she let us know that it was important to consider the scope of the project and make sure that it was feasible in the given time frame. This helped narrow Connect Marion from focusing on state-wide broadband access policy to specifically working in Marion itself. Furthermore, Dr. Payne-Foster highlighted the importance of the community interaction aspect. While she wrote that while working with E-Footprints may prove to be valuable, it is best for us to understand the state of broadband access in Marion through interacting with the community as opposed to relying on a third party. This led to an increased emphasis on the comment collection aspect of Connect Marion, as it focuses on close community interaction and gathering local feedback to help future efforts.

## Materials and Inputs

Throughout its development, Connect Marion has used various materials and inputs to achieve its goals. Ranging from campus partners such as Dr. Payne-Foster, Dr. Patton, Dr. Morgan, and Mr. Bolus to community partners in Marion such as Mr. Bennett, and Mrs. Ford in addition to Kevin Arvin and Hank Appleton of E-Footprints. Connect Marion's available human resources has been fundamental in its development in focusing on Marion's broadband development through a personal view. In addition to working with several individuals, Connect Marion has employed the resources of the Honors College, The University Fellows Experience, the UFE 14<sup>th</sup> cohort, older members, and alumni. Supplementing these resources with the knowledge and experience from past projects along with the personal skills of its members, Connect Marion has made effective and meaningful use of its available resources.

## Objectives

### SMARTS GOALS

#### **Goal 1:**

Through advocacy and assistance with grant writing, throughout the semester and during the BBE we will work with community organizations in their efforts to improve Perry County's broadband infrastructure, specifically, their efforts to bring high-speed internet to a greater number of Perry County residents, given a history of inadequate broadband access in Perry County.

***Specific:*** This goal is specific because we will be taking specific actions to aid Main Street Marion and E-Footprints in their efforts to bring improved broadband access to Perry County. We will be doing the tasks that they assign us to do rather than trying to tackle this major issue all at once.

***Measurable:*** Although improving broadband access in Perry County is a huge goal that will not be accomplished by the end of our Black Belt Experience, we can measure the progress we make alongside E-Footprints in the form of research and investigation of potential funding sources. We can measure this by the quantity of research assignments we are able to complete and the level of satisfaction that E-Footprints has with our work.

***Attainable:*** This goal is attainable because we will only commit to offering the amount of work that we see as feasible for the rest of the semester, and we will be working with our partners to determine a reasonable and attainable amount of work to do. We do not plan on accomplishing something huge in our project, rather, we hope to provide assistance to ongoing efforts, which we believe is an attainable goal.

**Relevant:** Mr. Bennett from Main Street Marion has spoken extensively about the need for and potential benefits from better broadband access throughout the county. These needs were especially exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic when connectivity became more important than ever before. As many aspects of our world become increasingly online, it is even more invaluable for all Perry County residents to have a reliable source of broadband access.

**Time-Bound:** Although the work to bring better broadband to Perry County will continue after our Black Belt Experience, many of the grant opportunities have time limitations and E-Footprints will want our work to be completed in a certain time frame. Thus, our goal is time bound because our specific tasks will require completion before the end of our Black Belt Experience.

**Sustainable:** This goal is sustainable because it consists of a contribution to efforts that will be continued by a variety of organizations in Perry County, including Main Street Marion, E-Footprints, and the Perry County School District. Since it is not a standalone effort and the work will be done alongside these people and organizations that are passionate about seeing this project to its completion, we believe that our efforts will be sustainable.

## **Goal 2:**

Through the collection of comments from Marion community members and subsequent submission to the Federal Communications Commission, during the Black Belt Experience, we will provide a platform for Marion citizens to share their experiences with broadband in Perry County, given a general lack of knowledge of these lived experiences within the federal government.

**Specific:** We will be taking specific actions to procure comments about broadband from members of the Marion community.

**Measurable:** We will measure our success by how many comments we are able to submit.

**Attainable:** We believe this to be attainable because we will be working with Main Street Marion and hopefully Mrs. Ford to find people who would be willing to share their experiences. We also aim to hear from people who are already leaders within the community who may be more willing to share with us.

**Relevant:** The FCC is soliciting these comments to better understand the reality of broadband in the United States, since currently much of the information they have is provided by internet providers themselves, which often doesn't align with the true levels of access within a community. Perry County has deep needs in the realm of broadband, so it is important that the FCC is made aware of the situation.

**Time-Bound:** These statements will need to be collected during our time in Marion and will be submitted to the FCC comment portal soon after collection.

**Sustainable:** The information we collect will hopefully be used to improve the accuracy of FCC maps and information. We may also share the statements we collect with an organization such as Main Street Marion which would then use the comments to draw attention to the issues with broadband access in the county especially since some local politicians do not currently have the motivation to act on this issue.

## **Short-Term Objectives**

Through our work with E-Footprints, we hope to make the long process of bringing better broadband to Perry County a little easier for their company as well as other community organizations such as Main Street Marion. Through our submissions to the FCC comment section, we hope to bring greater awareness and accuracy of information of the situation surrounding broadband in Perry County to the federal government.

## **Long-Term Objectives**

We hope to eventually see the work that we did, combined with the work of so many others, lead to new and improved broadband infrastructure in Perry County, making it into one of the counties with the best internet access in Alabama instead of one of the counties with the worst.

## **Assessment/Evaluation Plan**

Overall, we intend to assess the work regarding how useful and relevant the information is that we provide to our community partners (including E-Footprints and Main Street Marion) as well as the Federal Communications Commission. For our E-Footprints related research, we will measure the satisfaction of our partners with the information we are able to provide, as well as the overall amount of useful information we are able to give to them. For the FCC comment section, we will evaluate whether the information we were able to gather from Marion and Perry County residents aligns with what the FCC would find most useful for their purposes, as well as the number of relevant comments we are able to submit.

The primary information that we will assess will be qualitative, observational data, from our own observations as well as those of our partners. Keeping in mind the general criteria for what we wish to measure in the previous paragraph, we plan to, when or if appropriate, email or

ask our community partners E-Footprints and Main Street Marion an open question about their satisfaction with our work. This will occur after the Black Belt Experience has been completed. We will then analyze this information along with our own observations and levels of satisfaction with our work. Specifically, we will be asking ourselves what we would do differently if we were to do the project over again, how well we followed the plan we laid out, and the aspects of our work that we were most and least proud of and the reasoning behind each of these responses.

By asking specific questions, including quantitative as well as qualitative assessments, and incorporating outside feedback, we hope to be as unbiased as possible in the evaluation process. This will allow our group to carry out an efficient and effective evaluation of our Black Belt Experience project, helping us to not only learn from mistakes but to progress the fellows organization as a whole.

## LOGIC MODEL

Inputs & Resources	Activities
<p>Campus Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Dr. Payne Foster of UA (Community Medicine and Public Health)</li> <li>-Dr. Patton of UA (Public Policy and Administration)</li> <li>-Dr. Morgan and Mr. Bolus of UA</li> </ul> <p>Community Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Mr. Bennett (Main Street Marion)</li> <li>-Mrs. Ford (Sowing Seeds of Hope)</li> <li>-Kevin Arvin &amp; Hank Appleton (E-Footprints)</li> <li>-Dr. Smiley (Superintendent of Perry County School District)</li> </ul> <p>Honors College</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The University Fellows Experience</li> <li>-UFE Cohort 14th, older members and alumni</li> <li>-Knowledge and experience from past projects</li> <li>-Funding</li> </ul> <p>Group Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Each other</li> <li>-Our personal skills and knowledge</li> <li>-Our passions to make a difference</li> </ul>	<p>Meetings/Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Working and meeting with Mr. Bennett, Main Street Marion, Mrs. Ford, Sowing Seeds of Hope, and Dr. Smiley to understand the internet-based inequalities in Marion and Perry County</li> <li>-Meeting with campus partners such as Dr. Patton and Dr. Payne-Foster to gain more knowledge into the scope of broadband access issues</li> <li>-We will be able to gain a vast perspective on the issue at hand through our various conversations and meetings, all the while building stronger connections with the Marion community and the surrounding county</li> </ul> <p>E-Footprints</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Working with E-Footprints to aid the organization in its efforts to implement a pop-up broadband tower project in Perry County</li> <li>-We will be reviewing over the application proposal the organization submitted to the Alabama Broadband Accessibility Fund (ABAF), the title of which is the Perry County Broadband Initiative Project</li> <li>-We will aid their efforts in decreasing the cost of the aforementioned project by helping them research potential funding sources other than the ABAF, as the ABAF would only cover less than 50% of the total project cost</li> <li>-Potentially helping to facilitate connections between non-profits in Marion and E-Footprints to apply for these funds</li> </ul> <p>FCC Statements</p>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Collecting statements from residents and community leaders in Marion about their issues with internet connection and submitting these to the FCC (the Federal Communications Commission), focusing on residents recommended to us by our Marion partners</li> <li>-Creating a flyer to be distributed with the aid of local organizations to spread the word of the collection of statements/recordings for the FCC</li> <li>-Submitting the finished collection of statements to the FCC via their website portal or by other means if necessary</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;">Outputs</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Outcomes</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Funds to increase the broadband connectivity within the city and county, provided by the efforts of the E-Footprints organization</li> <li>-Research into the various sources of potential funding for the E-Footprints project (e.g., the ARC and the DRA)</li> <li>-The creation of potential applications for non-profits to apply for potential sources of funding for the E-Footprints initiative</li> <li>-A collection of statements and/or recordings about residents' issues with internet connection, which will be facilitated with the aid of community leaders and organizations</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;">Short Term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Helping E-Footprints to discover more sources of funding for their planned project</li> <li>-Increased advocacy for the implementation of broadband internet connection throughout Marion and Perry County</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">Long Term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Increased advocacy for the enhancement of broadband internet connection in rural areas</li> <li>-Deeper connection with our Marion partners and residents</li> <li>-A possible creation of connections between E-Footprints and non-profit organizations in Marion other than Main Street Marion</li> <li>-An increased quality of life for Marion residents</li> </ul>

-Eventual economic development from advocating for an enhanced broadband connection in the city, facilitating Marion's continuous growth over time

-Ability of citizens to have more of an online presence, thus promoting Marion for tourism

#### Target Audience

- Residents of Marion as a whole
- Those affected by the multi-faceted impacts of the COVID pandemic, especially its effects on internet inequalities throughout the nation and world
- Families without access to transportation, preventing them from being able to travel to an area with a better internet connection
- Individuals who need access to technology and the internet daily (e.g., due to work and school)
- Tourists, as Marion will be able to promote itself more online with a better internet connection
- Also, individuals coming down will have better access to the internet, thus causing a greater promotion of the city and an eventual increase in the number of tourists
- Marion residents who have the option to work remotely and could stay in Marion/return to Marion if remote work was an option with better broadband access

## Team Structure/Roles and Responsibilities

### **Devin Kodsi**

- Logic Model, Project Narrative, Calendar, Needs Addressed, and Contacts
- FCC Comment Submission Coordinator
- Main Street Correspondent
- General Research and Meeting with Partners

### **Lucy Besch**

- Executive Summary, SMARTS Goals, Evaluation Plan, Contacts, Contingency Plan, Project 1-Sheet/Press Release, and FCC Comment Poster
- FCC Comment Community Coordinator
- General Research and Meeting with Partners

### **Mithul Nallaka**

- Mission Statement, Project Narrative, Budget, and Volunteer Needs
- E-Footprints Contact
- General Research and Meeting with Partners

## Resources

### **Budget**

The defined budget for Connect Marion is as follows:

- Posters (x40): \$14.00 (\$0.35 per poster) [Poster Supplied in Appendix]

### **Volunteer Needs**

Currently, Connect Marion does not require any physical volunteer efforts. However, we ask that individuals inform us of possible community leaders or individuals that would be willing to speak with us about their experience with broadband access and connectivity in Marion. This is to aid in the efforts to inform the FCC of the current state of internet access in Marion.

## Calendar

### Spring Timeline

#### January

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
27	28	29	30	31 Zoom meeting with Mr. Bennett of Main Street Marion to gain preliminary understanding of community needs	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20 Email Mrs. Ford of SSOH for further understanding of community needs	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

			Phone call with Mrs. Ford			
31	1	2	3	4	5	6

## February

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
31	1	2	3	4 Marion Visit Report I due	5	6
7	8	9 Preliminary Project Proposal due	10	11	12 Reach out to Mrs. Ford to understand more of the community needs	13
14	15	16 Meeting with Mr. Bennett & Mrs. Passmore with fellows for community developme nt	17	18	19	20
21	22 Reach out to Mrs. Ford for contact information	23	24 Reach out to Dr. Patton of UA	25	26 Meet with Mr. Bennett as a group to receive	27

	of additional partners  Reach out to Mr. Bennett to discuss broadband				contact information of E-Footprints and Dr. Smiley of Perry County Schools	
28	1	2	3	4	5	6



## March

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
28	1	2 Reach out to E-Footprints via email	3 Meet with Dr. Patton	4 Marion Visit Report II due	5	6
7 Reach out to Mr. Bennett to discuss hearing back from E-Footprints  Reach out to Mrs. Ford to progress towards a more focused project	8 Reach out to Dr. Smiley to better understand internet issues	9 Received E-Footprint's project proposal document for reviewal	10	11	12	13
14	15 Reach out to E-Footprints to know how we can help after reading	16	17	18 Receive information about possible sources of funding from E-Footprints	19	20

	<p>their application</p> <p>Preliminary Action Plan Proposal due</p>			and begin research		
21	<p>22</p> <p>Group call with Dr. Smiley</p>	23	24	25	<p>26</p> <p>Meet with Mr. Bennett via Zoom to review the research we have conducted for E-Footprints</p>	27
<p>28</p> <p>Reach out to E-Footprints to set up a time to meet to discuss research</p>	<p>29</p> <p>Meeting with Mr. Bolus for BBE Project</p> <p>Hear back from E-Footprints about their waiting for the outcome of the ADECA broadband proposal</p>	30	31	1	2	3

## April

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
28	29	30	31	1 Reach out to Dr. Payne-Foster of UA to gain better understanding of actions we could take  Marion Visit Report III due	2	3
4	5 Meeting with Dr. Payne-Foster	6	7 Reach out to Mrs. Ford to ask about community members who would be willing to give statements for FCC	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20 Reach out to Mr.	21	22	23	24

		<p>Bennett to set up a time to meet before and during the BBE to further discuss research for E-Footprints</p> <p>Reach out to various member of the FCC to gain a better idea of types of statements that would be most beneficial</p>				
25	26	27	28	29	30	1

## May Schedule

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
25	26	27	28	29	30	1
2 Move-in Day to dorm rooms on campus for BBE	3 Travel Day	4 9:00 am-Meeting with Mr. Bennett to discuss avenues of funding & contact with E-Footprints  12:00-4:00 pm- collect statements for FCC submission and fulfill volunteer needs of other projects	5 9:00-4:00 pm- Collect statements for FCC submission and fulfill volunteer needs of other projects	6 Meeting with Marion non-profit to discuss application for possible funding sources  9:00-4:00 pm- Collect statements for FCC submission and fulfill volunteer needs of other projects	7 Travel Day	8
9	10 9:00 am-Meeting with Mr. Bennett to discuss further avenues for funding/contact	11 9:00-4:00 pm- Collect statements for FCC submission and fulfill volunteer needs of	12 Final meeting with nonprofit to discuss final aspects for possible	13 Travel Day	14 8:00 am-Move-out day from dorms on campus and end of BBE	15

	with E-Footprints	other projects	funding sources			
	12:00-4:00-Collect statements for FCC submission and fulfill volunteer needs of other projects		12:00-4:00 pm- Finish collecting statements for FCC submission and submit all of the statements to the FCC			
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31	1	2	3	4	5

## Contacts/Collaboration

### Campus Partners

#### Dr. Dana Patton

Dr. Patton is an associate professor in the UA Department of Political Science, where her specific research areas fall in the realm of public policy and administration. She aided us in narrowing down our search for a BBE project and understanding our limitations as a group.

#### Initial Contact





#### Notes from Meeting with Dr. Patton 3/3/21

We came into the meeting with Dr. Patton with large aspirations and hoping to help with healthcare as well as broadband. Dr. Patton encouraged us to narrow down our project and focus in on specific ways we could help the broadband issue. She helped us brainstorm ideas and talked with us about how we could help in healthcare-related ways during our free time in the Black Belt. Finally, she recommended that we seek further opinions and talk to people more experienced with the issue to get more advice.

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**Dr. Pamela Payne-Foster**



Dr. Pamela Payne-Foster is a professor in the UA College of Community Health Sciences and a member and leader of various organizations around campus. Dr. Payne-Foster provided us with insight for various aspects of our project, such as the collection of community statements for the FCC.

### Initial Contact

### Notes from Meeting with Dr. Payne-Foster 4/5/21

There were a few main takeaways from our meeting with Dr. Payne-Foster. She placed heavy emphasis on the size and politicization of the broadband issue, and the subsequent nuance and difficulty of any project trying to make headway on it. She had concerns about the motives

and goals of E-Footprints, given that it is a for-profit company, and encouraged us to find out more about the founders as well as have other aspects of our project to fall back on in case E-Footprints is no longer able to continue working with us. Dr. Payne-Foster liked the idea of getting comments for the FCC and believed that talking to the people of Marion and Perry County would be a great angle. Finally, she talked about the work she has currently been doing on a grant that included broadband as one aspect of the funding and brought up the idea of Perry County tagging along and possibly receiving some of the funding from that grant (which would happen farther in the future).

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## Community Partners

### **Mr. Donald Bennett**

President of Main Street Marion Alabama

## Initial Contact

### Notes from Meeting with Mr. Bennett 12/31

#### Questions & Answers

- What are some of the most significant problems that Marion faces right now?
  - Employment
    - Need sustainable jobs to support people making a decent living/wage
    - For housing
  - Viable healthcare
    - No hospital
    - Mother is old→ moved down to help her
    - Emergency service is certainly not optimal

- Nearest in Greensboro
  - Clinics all close at 4:30→ poses problems
- What are some of the issues that you personally would like to improve within the community?
  - Looks at the entire picture
  - Have to look at what caused the issue
  - Big box stores that are concentrated in the area
    - People spend money outside of the town
    - Money isn't being circulated enough
  - Assembly plants in Marion→ when they closed, jobs left
    - Smaller mom and pop businesses can't survive
    - Financial challenge
  - Buildings that are out of code to be able to rent
    - Hard to encourage business to rent (if buildings not in good shape)
    - Buildings are getting in worse condition and owners don't have enough money to fix them
    - Main Street is trying to get grant funding
    - Able to get ownerships of one of the buildings downtown one time
      - Bank granted them ownership of the building
      - Had a rendering done of the building recently for ideas for the building
        - Looking for someone to come in
    - Can purchase another building after more resources

- How has the community been impacted by the COVID pandemic?
  - Many businesses were already challenged
  - The pandemic made it even worse
  - Lines of people at Walmart and Lowes → decimated small towns
  - How has food supply been affected?
  - How have families dealt with online classes? Have they been able to deal with it at all? (due to lack of technology)
    - Drastically affected the area
    - They don't have a lot of internet here
    - Tried to reach out to legislators
    - Tried to reach out to AT&T → they said that Marion didn't have enough individuals for an upgrade (same for all of these small towns)
      - It's just business, won't do it unless there is a grant
    - Need to bring in industry and jobs to bring more people into area
- During our meeting in the UFE 101 class, you discussed your wish to see Marion and the government collaborate to construct a hospital. How has a lack of this institution affected residents during typical times? During these unprecedented times?
  - One of the matriarchs (Barnets) → lost Inez to Covid 19
    - Husband returned, she passed away
  - Having closer healthcare might have helped
  - She had to go to Selma
  - A lot of people make decisions on the proximity of healthcare
  - This was before Thanksgiving

- She was revered by some many in the community
  - Devoted to her church
  - Worked with Main Street
- She was in her 80s, showed people how you can work together
- Their efforts help to continue her spirit
- Have you and/or Main Street Marion partnered with any previous fellows Black Belt Experience project in the past? If so, what did the projects involve?
  - Partner with horseshoe farms
  - Meet with the elderly
  - Cleanup projects
  - Pass out food to elderly
  - UFE
    - Pocket park
    - Paintings
  - Currently working with Lincoln Society
    - Renovating their gymnasium and center for activities→ he helped to support them by writing a letter
- What projects would you like to see some of the fellows hopefully carry out in Marion during the spring?
  - They are opening a new art center in town
  - Ed and Susan Passmore donating a building to Main Street
  - Just had a staircase moved in
  - Cleaning up art center

- Pocket part area
  - Getting it developed and cleaned up
- Trying to enhance that area for coffee shop
- Flower area near Coretta Scott King
- Constant removal of weeds in flower beds
  - Planting in new flowers
- New banners in downtown
- Painting projects
  - Buildings for murals→ would be nice to expand this type of project
- Beautification and upgrades in Marion
- Do you feel that Marion residents have a good understanding of the Covid-19 vaccine? If not, why is that?
  - A lot of people very apprehensive of the vaccine
  - It took circumstances for people to understand how serious this issue is
  - The momentum of the information really hit the city
  - Early on people didn't get the pandemic (didn't understand) → many weren't wearing masks
    - Now, there are only a select few individuals like this now
  - He would follow anything that a health professional would tell him rather than simply a neighbor
- When developing a BBE project, what are some other individuals/organizations you would recommend reaching out to in the community?
  - Frances Ford

- Sowing Seeds of Hope
- Project Horseshoe Farms
- Lincolnite society in Marion
  - A lot of history in Marion
  - A lot about civil rights movement
- Historic preservation society
  - A lot about the confederate side of the Civil War
- Lincolnite and historic groups little bit of rivals (but have to see both sides of history)

#### More Information

- Gets frustrated when politicians say that people don't want to work
- A job a 7 an hour won't sustain a family→ need to change
- Need a job with a sustainable wage
- Developers come in and see if community is actually making an effort
  - Interest and life are still here→ building things to revitalize community
  - Can't have apathy in community→ developers won't want to come in and build
- Everything comes back to bringing businesses and jobs into the city→ will go a long way to improve the city as a whole (economic revitalization→ more individuals coming in→ more money being spent→ cycle)
- History is history (can't change it→ all you can do is learn from it and move forward)
- He really wants to help this town get where it needs to be



- We can make this a tremendous town (it's a jewel)
- Once everything settles down covid-wise
  - Coffee house will be opening up and ice cream parlor
  - Pizza parlor possibly opening
- He is chairman of Perry County Airport now→ trying to help bring in more people and money
  - Military aircraft there to sell more fuel
  - Talked with developers to put a distribution center in airport for Marion→ more jobs for Black Belt

#### Notes from Meeting with Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Passmore 2/16/21

##### Preliminary Notes

- Broadband is something near and dear to their hearts
  - Very important for them now
- Legacy of Marion is important
- Hospital
  - They need a hospital there!
- The stores have been really backed up with issues, problems
  - They are receptive to us coming down to help
- They are hoping that we all can come down to help out with our projects
- They want things like paintings done as well
- The old hotel has several windows that have been blown down

- Have wood over the openings
- Idea- take the wood and paint something on it, putting posters on it→ beautification
  - The plywood looks terrible
- Beautiful posters that have blown down over time
  - Making the downtown look better
- Will have a space that could be painted
- The Wilburn building→ a lot that can be done there
  - They're working on the electrical components right now
- Coretta King garden and pocket park→ gardening and weeding
- Lighting→ want to eventually add this to the pocket park
- Have a monthly cleanup day
  - Can always come to this
  - Sydney Johnson
  - Come over on Saturdays
  - Pick up garbage people throw around town
- They thank us for reaching out to them
- They are trying to redefine the downtown, making it more inviting for others to come down

#### Answering questions

- First step→ putting in the coffee shop

- Looking at what building would fit best in the downtown area
- Have to make those spaces inviting→ have to repair them to make them inviting
- Work with existing owners and how they can assist them to make their buildings more inviting
- They will update the college city structure→ will help change the way that the college looks
- They don't think that they are as digitally connected as they should be (the city as a whole)
- Typically, it is the chamber of commerce that does promotion
  - But they do not have a chamber of commerce→ Main Street Marion serves as this
- Discover Marion website created by fellows
- Businesses coming to Marion
  - Coffee house near the fire station
    - Good space for the community to come to→ will enhance the square
  - BDA Farms→ organic shop to sell fruit, vegetables, and farm-raised meat
- Helping to make people understand that College City is more than a drug store
- Want to use empty buildings to promote new businesses with their slogan
  - Want people to see it as a new opportunity
- Issues with vacant buildings
  - Must be careful with damages of buildings
  - No 1 problem- roof repair of buildings
    - Some of them need extensive repair and some might need to be replaced→ can become expensive

- Getting estimates on the roofs→ difficult during covid times
  - A lot of the building are owned by private owners→ trying to get ownership of these buildings to get them repaired
  - Can't just assume that your roof will be ok
  - In the last ten years→ had one building fall down
- How can we be useful down there?
  - They hate to have us come down here just to pull weeds
    - They need that, but it seems like a poor use of our time to them
  - They want to give us something that lets us use our brain power
  - They desperately need volunteers
  - Very small percentage of the population volunteers to do things
  - If their town looks bad→ people will not open businesses here→ more jobs
    - If the town doesn't look like it cares about itself→ people will invest in companies here→ based on research from Main Street organization
  - Painting projects and weeding projects→ what Mrs. Passmore thinks that they need the most
  - Mr. Bennett loves the broadband connection idea
    - They are working with commissioners already to improve the broadband connection
    - Talk more with SSOH about the hospitals
    - Helping them with some of the grants, writing letters to politicians, etc.
  - Mr. Bennett also believes that they need a welcoming city as well
    - Weeds, flowers

- Nathan Harris building
  - They really need help clearing out the building and cleaning it
  - Once the roof is completed, can help clear out the space
  - Old plaster must be pulled down
  - Floors need to be buffed, etc. in terms of hard labor
- The project with the windows would be a huge help
  - The windows were blown out by Zeta
- High-speed internet downtown
- No high-speed internet out of downtown (2-3 miles)
  - They need this throughout the county
  - AT&T int responding to their requests
    - They said that they can't put in the transformer to hook the phones up the high-speed internet
  - She wanted to get in touch with AARP
  - There are people that need internet due to health issues, security
  - This should not be hard in the 21st century
  - Many people in the county are working on this, Mrs. Passmore's husband and Mr. Bennett especially working on this
  - Very interesting in getting the word out to the right people→ promotion
- Feel welcome to call her anytime if we have any questions
  - Her thing is design and facades, she's working on the Wilburn Building
- There will certainly be projects in various buildings downtown to help
- Sydney James→ cleanup day one Saturday a month



## Notes from Meeting with Mr. Bennett 2/26

### Questions & Answers

- How long has broadband connectivity been an issue in Perry County and in Marion? How long have you along with other community members worked to resolve this issue for residents?
  - Moved here in 2012
    - It's been an issue for awhile
  - Chairman in 2017
  - Affects the entire county but some areas more than others
- What are the main issues that are caused by lack of internet connection? During typical times? During these unprecedented times?
  - Affects the school of course during these times

- Blocks access to education
  - Been able to portable hotspots in some areas
    - But there are so many areas where this will work
  - Affected seniors
    - Even the bracelets they have are tied to the internet--> can't report a medical issue
  - Stagnating business growth opportunities
    - Ecommerce, purchasing items online
- Can you tell me a little bit about what the county is doing with school busses to improve internet connection for families?
- Do you agree with the UN decree that currently, internet connectivity is a human right?
  - Does agree with this
  - But gets into an internet that contentious
  - Can't afford to put internet everywhere→ the way that companies think
  - Believe that there should be funds available to improve broadband internet
  - You have to have internet now
    - Need it to survive in this day and age
- What are some of the efforts that you and other community members have made to improve the status of broadband connectivity throughout Perry County?
  - Meeting that he attended yesterday
    - Senator Hudson
    - E-Footprints→ they do the installation of the system
    - They are doing the follow through to make sure that this can happen

- The senator wants to make sure that this will happen
    - Sponsored through Main Street
  - Have you been able to reach out to local or even state officials?
  - What may the economic barriers to implementing broadband be in Perry County?
    - Small rural town
    - Don't have enough population to justify to put broadband in this area
    - Broadband receives money back from subscription
      - Small amount of people→ not enough money for the companies, not good enough for the investment for the company
    - Perry County is a poor county→ they don't have the money to contribute
    - AT&T flat out said that they aren't interested since Marion doesn't have enough individuals in the city
    - Will take negotiation and time for people to do this
- Have any of your efforts been more successful than others? If so, why do you think they have been successful?
  - He has been leaving it to the county commissioners
  - Has been to seminars
  - But left it to elected officials
  - When asked to be involved
  - Been board president of Main Street and Airport Authority
    - Wants to be more involved in internet due to these experience
    - Opportunity for growth
  - In the past, there is a large need in the county



- They work on the things that need to be done day to day
  - He works on the long-term efforts (i.e. broadband)
    - He hopes that long term and short-term plans will come together
  - Have many businesses opening downtown
  - More eateries and shops
    - Would be nice if they had free Wi-Fi downtown→ would draw so many people from college to do homework, tourists, etc.
    - Want to develop the courthouse square
- Who are the major groups/people currently working on this issue in Perry County?
  - We have to make them excited about this issue
    - Like an investor looking into a town
  - Why would they put money into a bad area? → have to make sure to build the town to make it look like they care to sell it to politicians
    - Have to be able to sell the potential of the town
  - It's all about selling
- Where do you see things heading from here? Are there any developments or plans that are currently underway?
  - Business opportunity growth
  - Group in Selma repairing
  - Would like to help repair the airport in Marion→ would give them a lot of opportunities
  - Would need internet services for this→ would allow for more business growth
    - Auto suppliers, ambulance service

- Without GPS internet service→ can't find where people need services
- How has the \$9.5 million in broadband expansion grants made by Governor Ivey aided Perry County in improving broadband connectivity? Did it aid the county at all?
  - The amount available to them was the \$1.5 million that went to them→ applied for maximum funds
  - Are there any current plans to make these grants available in Perry County

#### Additional Notes

- School busses
  - New Perry County superintendent
  - Dr. Smiley
- Trying to bring in a company for broadband
  - Looking for someone to help them write grants
  - New broadband connection services
  - Picking up signal
- They are the worst internet connection in the state
  - This would improve
- They have written a grant to ADECA for 1.5 million dollars
  - Need help with writing grants
  - Will know by the end of March if they can carry out their project→ will have two years to carry out the project
- Will email the contact information to us to reach out to them

- Dr. Smiley
- His grandson is in 9th grade
  - Going to Francis Marion
  - Even though they have given them Chromebooks
  - Supplied each family with a portable hotspot
  - But those that cannot get a signal from an area→ bad
- E-Footprints will be the main company that the grants are being applied for
  - Had a meeting with them yesterday
  - They want to implement pop-towers→ 5G system
    - Would connect the entire county of Perry County
    - Would not be underground technology
    - The towers go in quickly
- Free Wi-Fi downtown idea
  - They would have to talk to business owners to see if they could group funds together
  - He thinks that it would do a lot to bolster their businesses!
- He grew up in Detroit
  - Surrounded by well-known artists
  - Moved closer to Ann-Arbor→ college town (great experiences)
  - He wants to help to improve Marion with development
    - It's all right here, give them something to do
    - Everyone would come to Marion
- Actions for the governor to take

- Come into town and see all the projects they're working on in the town
- Jailhouse renovation to a museum
  - Where they housed political figures in the civil rights movement
- Art center in Washington street
- Show her what they are trying to do
- Support of the governor of AL→ using Marion as a model for other rural areas
- In what ways can we help aid your efforts to improve internet connection without hindering your efforts in the process?
  - Whether it is through grant proposals or simply helping to write letters to the state legislators
  - Reach out to E-Footprint next!!!
    - They can tell us exactly what to do
    - Helping to write grants, etc.
    - Hank Appleton
    - Kevin Arvin
    - Will send the contact information of various individuals to us
    - D. Smiley→ ask questions to her about the situation with the busses, internet, and schools

Meeting with Mr. Bennett 3/26/21

- He has not had any correspondence with the organization of E-Footprints
  - Had emails, but no meetings

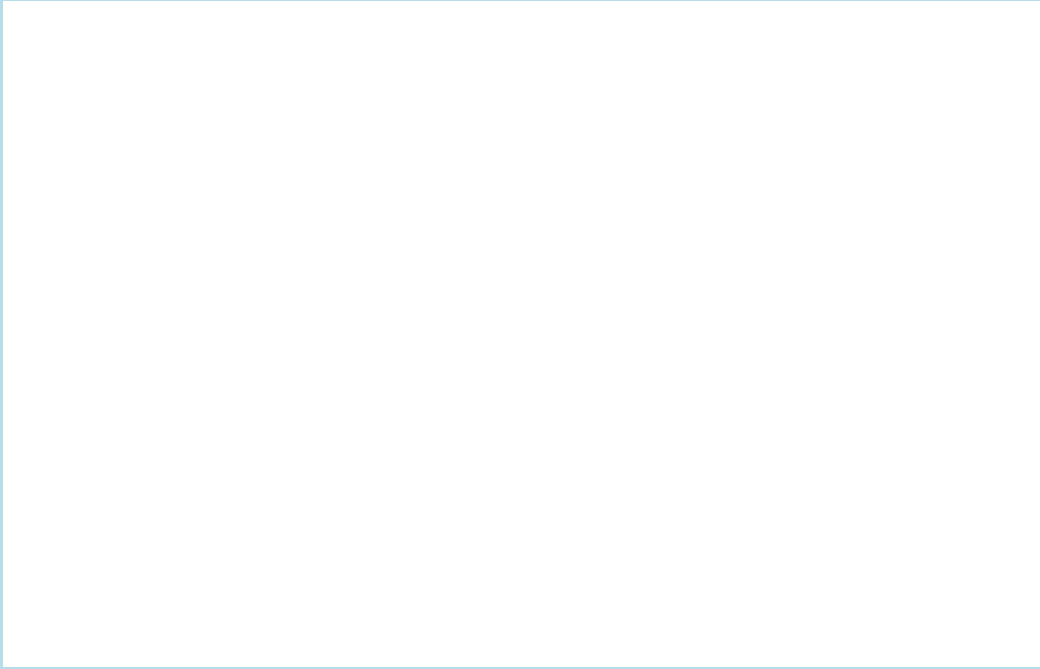
- Filling out grants for a non-profit organization→ Main street would be good for that
  - Also Sowing Seeds of Hope
  - Maybe even Project Horseshoe Farms
- There is no growth without broadband
  - Ties into everything in the town
  - It is one of the core infrastructure pieces here
- They have partnered OPAL (<https://opportunityalabama.com/>)
  - Founder is Alex Flachsbart
  - Working to identify the core capabilities of revitalizing the town
- He is interested in getting information from him
  - Alex is in contact with individuals from the Delta Region Authority
- Alex might have some additional information to provide insight
  - Maybe even to help for the ARC issue
- Perry County could use the median income to help with the ARC issue→ to apply
- Unfortunately, the size of Marion→ there hasn't been much appetite for elected officials to aid in broadband connectivity
  - They will keep on motivating the politicians about broadband
  - The politicians will have to deal with it through public pressure
- He does not care if they get credit for it→ as long as it gets done
- He truly appreciates our help with broadband
- If this gets shut down→ people will wonder why the town isn't getting the help they need
- He will reach out to E-Footprints to get more information

- He will continue to get more information from other groups to us to help with our projects
  - Mr. Bennett will help to get us connected OPAL and Alex
  - He is working with a lot of different initiatives with the airport
    - He is very tired from working on many different projects in Marion
    - He is working on a community development project involving installing lights and plants in the city
  - Reach out to him to let him know how else he can help
  - He will let Alex know that we would like to be a part of the work that they are doing for Marion and Perry County
- 

**Mrs. Frances Ford**

Leader of Marion Sowing Seeds of Hope

## Initial Contact





## Notes from Meeting with Mrs. Ford 1/27/21

Mrs. Ford was able to provide invaluable information during our initial meeting, allowing us to gain a better perspective of the Marion community. In terms of the community project that she was most proud of, she said that she was extremely passionate about the establishment of the dialysis center in Marion. She described how she has seen several good changes come about within the community, specifically through the work of outside organizations and individuals. However, many of Marion's youth have left the city in search of better-paying jobs and better opportunities. At the moment, the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the main issues that the community faces. The city's infected numbers are growing every day, and these individuals practically have no access to healthcare whatsoever. There is a large need to ensure that schools and other organizations are receiving proper resources during these difficult times. Personally, Mrs. Ford would like to focus on improving healthcare in Marion and the status of jobs in the community. She stated how, due to the pandemic, many of the churches are not meeting and that children have been severely affected. Overall, the city has lost its momentum in terms of community development, as people are not coming together as often to resolve issues. Mrs. Ford described how the school systems have put in much effort to ensure that students have access to online classes and how SSOH helps children with online learning by providing them with internet access and computers. She stated how they are working to educate residents about staying at home if they have certain COVID-related symptoms, and they are also trying to make sure that residents understand the benefits of the vaccine. SSOH has partnered with several BBE projects in the past, which involved grant writing for SSOH, working in SSOH's office, and helping SSOH with the blood clinic. Mrs. Ford related how much of a pleasure it is to work with

the students from UA, as they are always excited and have a good attitude. I talked with her about projects she would like to see implemented by the fellows, and she discussed several of her passions. For one, she would like to see a group come in and help to make SSOH's building more temperature and user friendly, especially when it comes to the classrooms for children. Next, she really wants a group to help change the state's healthcare plan so that Perry County can receive 25 hospital beds for critical patients. She also discussed what other organizations and individuals to reach out to when creating our BBE projects such as Main Street Marion and Dr. Trimble. To conclude our conversation, Mrs. Ford provided essential advice for creating and implementing a project in Marion. She said to not just think of the numbers and facts when entering the city but to get to know the residents and enjoy the experience. She additionally emphasized the creation of relationships with those in the city, which would be facilitated through talking with others and listening to their stories.



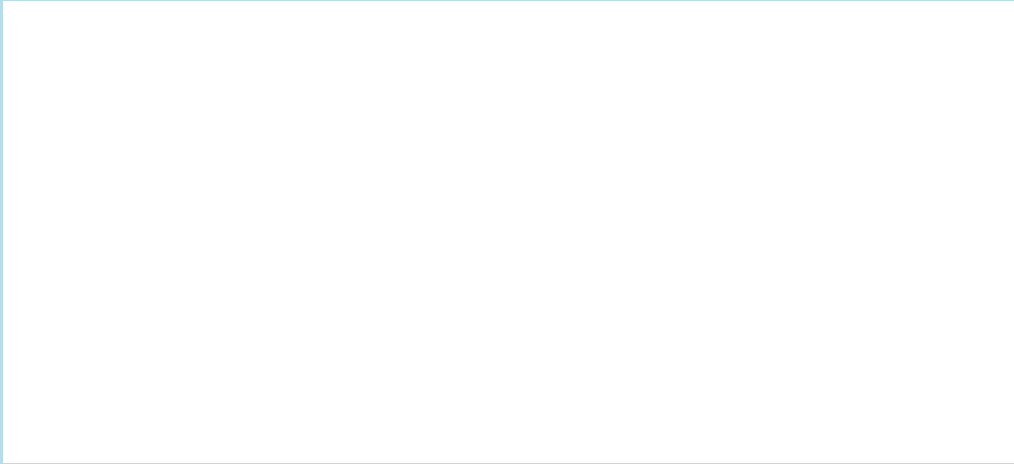




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**Dr. Marcia Smiley**  
Superintendent of Perry County Schools

## Initial Contact



## Notes from Meeting with Dr. Smiley 3/22/21

Dr. Smiley provided us with a lot of helpful information about broadband access within the Perry County school system. She spoke extensively about their preparedness for the

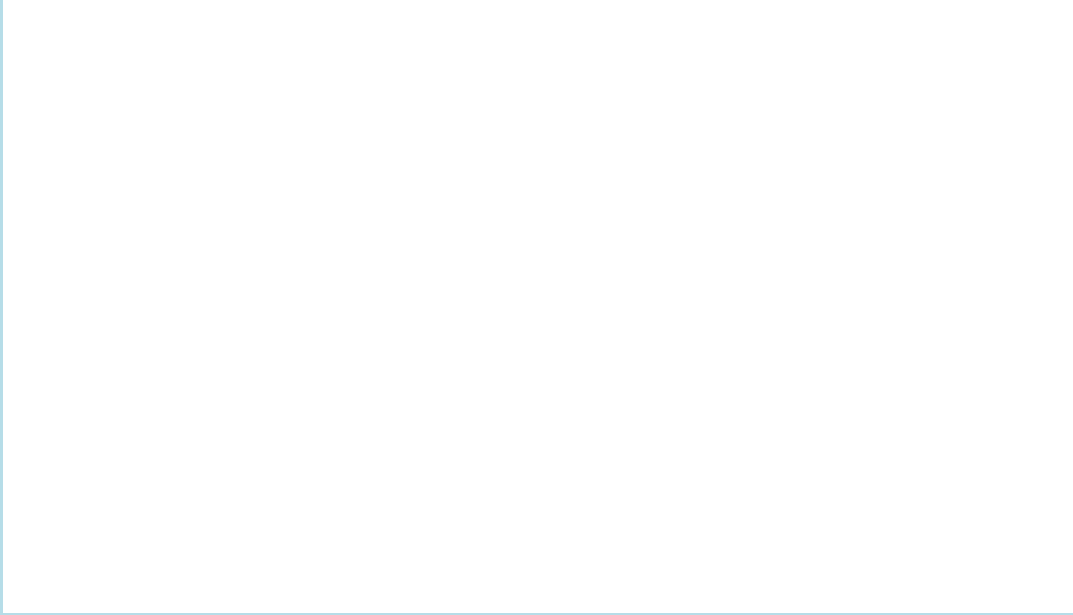
pandemic, highlighting the success they have had with the Apple ConnectEd grant program as well as the buses equipped with Wi-Fi located throughout the county. But she also emphasized the difficulties caused by dead spots in the county that have no service at all from any carrier. Although the district implemented hotspots for students without Wi-Fi at home, some households did not have success with a hotspot from any carrier due to their location inside a dead spot in the county.

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**Kevin Arvin and Hank Appleton**  
E-Footprints

Initial Contact





## Appendix

### Materials for Printing/Reference

#### Poster

# TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH INTERNET SERVICE IN PERRY COUNTY

We are students at the University of Alabama who are assisting with ongoing efforts to bring greater internet access to Perry County.

The Federal Communications Commission is asking for comments from citizens related to broadband, and we want to make sure they hear voices from Perry County. We would love to talk to you about your access to internet, internet speed and quality, and how internet access impacts your life.

Please contact Mr. Donald Bennett of Main Street Marion at the information listed below and he will put you in touch with us to find out more or set up a meeting in person (socially distanced) or a telephone meeting. You may also contact Devin Kodsi directly if you would prefer.

We are grateful for your help!

**Devin Kodsi**  
(423)-883-0191  
dakodsi@crimson.ua.edu

**Donald Bennett**  
(734)-250-4119  
donald.mainstreetmarion@gmail.com



## Link to E-Footprints' ADECA Perry County Broadband Initiative Application

<https://adeca.alabama.gov/broadband-applications/>

- To download file, find “E Footprints- Perry Co” and click on hyperlink

### Potential Interview Questions

The information we hope to get out of these interviews includes general availability and service quality as well as effects and personal experiences.<sup>15</sup>

Different versions and/or combinations of these questions may be asked depending on who we are interviewing and what personal experiences they have had with the issue.

Personal information needed includes first name, last name, state, and zip code.<sup>16</sup>

- Can you provide any examples of times you have had problems with broadband/internet access/ phone service in Perry County? How has this affected your daily life in the county?
- Have you experienced any “dead spots” in Perry County where there is no service? Has this caused you any issues personally? Could you provide any more information about

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<sup>15</sup> Campbell, Ian Carlos. “You Can Now Tell the FCC Just How Broken the Internet Is for You.” *The Verge*, The Verge,

23 Mar. 2021, [www.theverge.com/2021/3/22/22345533/fcc-broadband-data-collection-program-fix-the-internet](http://www.theverge.com/2021/3/22/22345533/fcc-broadband-data-collection-program-fix-the-internet).

<sup>16</sup> “Share Your Broadband Experience.” *Federal Communications Commission*, Federal Communications Commission, 24 April 2021. [consumercomplaints.fcc.gov/hc/en-us/requests/new?ticket\\_form\\_id=360001440131](https://consumercomplaints.fcc.gov/hc/en-us/requests/new?ticket_form_id=360001440131).

where in the county these dead spots are or where there is a greater prevalence of spots without service?

- Would you say that you have quality phone service in Perry County? Do web pages load quickly on your device? Do you have the ability to conduct video calls?
- How many options do you have for phone or internet providers in Marion? How many in other areas of the county outside Marion?

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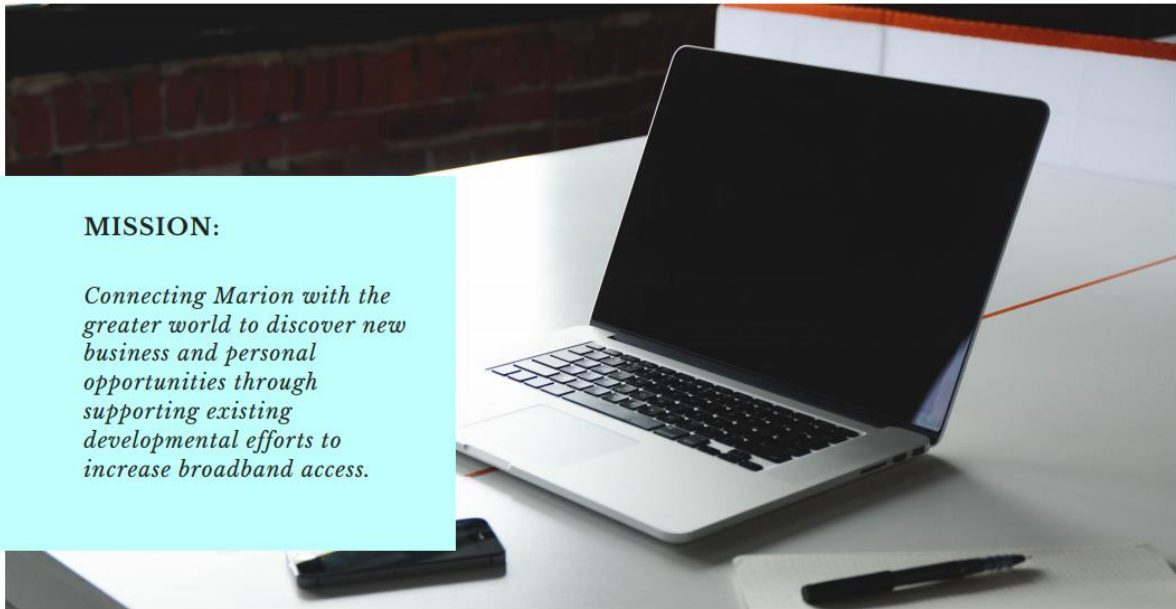
## Project 1-Sheet

# CONNECT MARION

*The University of Alabama University Fellows Experience*

### MISSION:

*Connecting Marion with the greater world to discover new business and personal opportunities through supporting existing developmental efforts to increase broadband access.*



### PROJECT DETAILS

We are looking to aid ongoing efforts to bring better broadband to Perry County, Alabama through research and data collection. We will be collecting comments from members of the community about their experiences with broadband to submit to the Federal Communications Commission. We will also be assisting E-Footprints, a technology company, with their efforts to procure further funding for a broadband project by doing grant-related research.

Our work will be completed by May 13th, 2021.

### Our team:

Mithul Nallaka  
msnallaka@crimson.ua.edu  
Biochemistry and Computer  
Science Major

Lucy Besch  
lebesch@crimson.ua.edu  
Economics and  
International Studies Major

Devin Kodsi  
dakodsi@crimson.ua.edu  
Aerospace Engineering and  
Physics Major

## **Risk Management/Contingency Planning**

One of the biggest unknowns for our project is due to the sporadic nature of our communication with E-Footprints. They are a for-profit company that is very busy due to their undertakings, and they do not always have time on their hands to keep up correspondence with our group. Bearing this in mind, it is important that we have alternative or altered plans in case we are not able to continue working at a full capacity with E-Footprints.

One of these contingency plans involves providing the research that we have done on broadband grants to local organizations such as Main Street Marion and Sowing Seeds of Hope. Then, they will be more prepared if E-Footprints or a similar company comes to them asking for help procuring funds. This is likely to happen since many for-profit companies are not able to apply for some of these types of grants, so they will likely call upon the services of local nonprofits.<sup>17</sup>

Along with this, we may also provide some of the comments we gain from our FCC interviews to these community organizations for them to use in further materials and in gaining community and politician support for future broadband initiatives.

An additional contingency plan involves the FCC comment collection aspect of our group's project. During our project, we unfortunately might not have as many community residents willing to provide a statement as we anticipated. If something like this does occur, we know that our community partners would be more than willing to provide statements for us to

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<sup>17</sup> Bennett, Donald. Interview. 26 Mar. 2021.

submit. In addition, they would more than likely be able to provide us with a few additional residents who would be willing to participate.