**News Release**

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**Greene County: 2021 State of the County**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WAYNESBURG **–** As the calendar year closes, we thought it appropriate to provide an update of county government progress and initiatives. Throughout the past year, your county commissioners and staff have remained focused on making Greene County a better place to live, learn, work and play. Significant progress has been made in several areas within county government and we plan to keep that momentum going in 2022.

Most will recall that 2020 was a team-building year for us, marked by the departure of a significant number of staff members following the 2019 election and the majority of the year was ravaged by COVID-19. We adapted, adjusted and continued to serve Greene County residents and visitors during those uneasy times. Following the height of the COVID impacts, we have been able to return to normal county operations.

**Local Business Support**

The economic impact of COVID has yet to be fully recognized, but small businesses, restaurants and hospitality industry participants were significantly impacted. The Greene County Department of Planning & Community Development has presented significant opportunities toward financial stability and recovery to businesses affected by COVID. Two financial support programs have been offered through the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program and the County Block Grant - Hospitality Industry Recovery Program within the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED).

A CDBG CARES grant of $1,277,083.00 funded the Forgivable Advance for Small Business Assistance (FASBA) program and the COVID-19 Hospitality Recovery Program (CHIRP) Grant Program distributed $600,000 to qualified Greene County businesses. In all, 39 local businesses were supported with COVID related grants totaling more than $1.8 million. Our staff worked tirelessly to find, apply for and secure these funds. These are competitive grant programs, not Greene County tax dollars.

**Residential Support**

Just as businesses were affected, families also experienced stressed finances. Greene County Department of Planning & Community Development administered a $500,000 HOME Investment Partnership Program to qualified applicants and has applied for a $1,054,199 grant from the Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Fund. Both programs provide no interest, deferred payment loans to assist with roof issues, safety and health issues, updates to major systems such as furnaces, outdated electric or plumbing systems, and other repairs to preserve, improve and stabilize the current housing stock in Greene County. Assuming compliance of the homeowner, this loan is forgivable after five years. This is for owner occupied homes only.

Additional support to Greene County residents is available through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP). ERAP is administered with the goal of providing families and individuals financial assistance for rent including: rent, rental arrears, utilities and home energy costs, utility and home energy costs arrears, and other expenses related to housing incurred due, directly or indirectly, to COVID19 and housing stability services to eligible households.

Greene County’s allocation of $2,383,055.41 has supported 263 families/individuals thus far and Greene County Human Services continues to accept and process applications on a daily basis.

**Broadband Initiatives**

Greene County leads the commonwealth in rural broadband deployment with more than $8 million in completed or awarded investments and additional grant requests pending approval. Building on the successes we experienced with a more than $3 million investment in broadband infrastructure during 2020, Greene County was awarded an Appalachian Regional Commission’s (ARC) Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) Initiative in September 2021. This highly competitive grant provides $2.5 million for broadband investment and Kinetic by Windstream is the industry partner contributing an additional $2.7 million in capital investment to the project bringing the total project value to over $5 million.

This project will provide gigabit speed broadband access to nearly 1,000 currently underserved or unserved houses in the Graysville, New Freeport and Spraggs exchanges. These exchanges cover geographic areas larger than traditionally considered in the defined area of these towns and include all or portions of six townships: Aleppo, Freeport, Gilmore, Perry, Springhill and Wayne. Approximately105 miles of fiber-optic cable will be installed as well as the hardware and other technical requirements offering “fiber-to-the-prem” service. Engineering design and environmental reviews are currently being completed and installation should begin in early 2022.

Additional grant funding has been requested through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), United States Department of Commerce. Should the application be successful, the approximately $8 million grant will be paired with a Windstream investment of over $6 million to bring gigabit service to an additional 2,000 homes in Greene County.

These are competitive grant programs, not Greene County tax dollars. Funding is allocated for broadband or other infrastructure improvements and will be spent elsewhere if not in Greene County.

**Wisecarver**

The Wisecarver Reservoir and Recreation Area project combines currently funded softball fields, a kayak launch and walking trails with future developments to create a year-round destination. Department of Environmental Protection permits were finally obtained in 2020 and the first phase started in 2021. The first phase consists of a softball field, parking lot, concession stand, walking trail and a kayak/canoe launch site. Grant funding was received in 2021 for the kayak/canoe launch site which is currently under design and environmental review.

The influx of federal money available has potential to greatly speed up the anticipated completion of this project. Greene County is applying for a $3 million grant through Economic Development Administration (EDA) grant process. The project will assist Greene in diversifying activities available to draw visitors and improve the quality of life for the region.

**Increased Recreation Opportunities**

In addition to working on the Wisecarver project, the Recreation Department is doing a great job increasing the opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy new entertainment venues in Greene County. Our staple events like the swimming pools, festivals and fairs please residents and attract visitors, so by adding new events like the Country Fest, Balloon Glow, and Fishing Frenzy we’re enticing new visitors. Studies show 1.1 million people live within an hour’s drive of Waynesburg and these new events attract visitors into the county producing new customers for our restaurants, retail shops and lodging facilities.

**Veteran’s Services**

This past year, the Greene County Veterans Affairs office has added two programs supporting Veterans in our community: Together with Veterans (TWV) and Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS).

Together With Veterans (TWV) is a community-based suicide prevention program for rural Veterans. The TWV program follows a comprehensive public health approach and is aligned with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide. The program is fully funded by the Veterans Administration Office of Rural Health and administered through a local steering committee and facilitators. Currently in its final planning, organizational and functional review, the TWV program will be available to Veterans in early 2022.

Likewise, a new Veteran’s tele-medicine program, Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS), will be available in early 2022. Physically located in the Greene County VA Office, the ATLAS sites provide Veterans with a private appointment room to meet with the VA provider, and connects with that VA provider through secure, real-time video. An on-site attendant is available at the ATLAS site to guide the Veteran through the process of connecting to the VA provider and services include; Primary Care, Mental Health counseling, Clinical Pharmacy, Nutrition services, Social Work and more as services are coordinated within the VA medical system.

**Increased transparency and communications**

Along with livestreaming public meetings, Facebook postings, and frequent press releases, the Commissioners started a series of Podcasts this fall. Podcasts are an additional social platform targeting a younger audience and increasing the opportunity for all to become better informed of current events, news and county issues. The podcast titled, County Conversations, is available to listeners on Spotify, Amazon Music, Google Podcasts and YouTube. Residents can also find access to the podcast by visiting the Greene County Commissioners’ Facebook page.

Town hall meetings are still available throughout Greene County. We would like to continue these in order to stay connected to county residents, gather their concerns and work toward solutions – no matter the issue. If you would like to host a town hall meeting, call the Commissioner’s office at (724) 852-5210.

**Challenges**

The recent closing of Blacksville No. 2 Mine and Mylan's Morgantown plant have highlighted regional economic relationships, especially with our neighbors to the south. Our interests are very well aligned with Monongalia County and Morgantown and we continue to work closely with the Monongalia County Commissioners to leverage regional initiatives and advance our common interests.

Although several industry partners have announced positive initiatives for increased employee requirements and diversified industrial business opportunities, financial issues will continue to plague Greene County until we increase revenue through new developments for residential housing, businesses, and industry. We continue to seek opportunities to diversify the economy towards new industries, technology, increased tourism and other potential economic drivers.

From 2014 through 2020, revenue of the Greene County budget has been increasingly padded with non-traditional, particularly ACT 13 funding. The current expense to revenue ratio is unsustainable. We have cut more than $2 million in annual expenses in the county budget, but there has been no increase in traditional revenue. The next two years, 2022 and 2023, will be salvaged by the influx of federal funding like the American Rescue Plan; but going forward we need substantial increases in the tax base with increased businesses, industry and residential housing activities.

**Looking ahead**

There have been positive developments in diversifying workforce requirements and industrial business opportunities, a significant investment in broadband deployment and increased community involvement in defining, analyzing and working toward solutions in cooperative efforts to mitigate some community concerns. These are positive trends where there have not been in decades.

We have momentum in the right direction; however, we must remain focused toward smartly investing our precious resources, growing opportunities to increase tax revenue for future budget cycles and continue fiscally responsible decision making. It is imperative that we continue to work with other government entities, school districts, and develop public/private partnerships in order to bring businesses, diversified industry and increased residential housing activity into Greene County. Every day, your county commissioners and staff remain focused on making Greene County a better place to live, learn, work and play.

Additional information can be obtained on the Greene County Commissioner’s Facebook page or by calling (724) 852-5210.