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## **Recommendations to Expand Affordable Broadband Access in Western Maryland are Announced**

*Tri-County Council for Western Maryland and TEDCO project aims  
to improve economic opportunities in the region*

Cumberland, Md. (April 19, 2004) – The Tri-County Council for Western Maryland and the Maryland Technology Development Corporation (TEDCO) released findings from a study to expand affordable broadband communications options for businesses in Garrett, Allegany and Washington Counties. Funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the detailed report includes 18 policy recommendations that build upon seven specific goals for the region. The research was compiled from the survey results of 174 Western Maryland businesses with 10 or more employees, and one-on-one personal interviews with more than 90 businesses, key industry players and prospective partners.

“As a whole, Western Maryland companies currently have at least limited access to high-speed communication technologies that are critical to success in today’s marketplace, but there is an obvious need and demand for an increase of competitively priced broadband services throughout these three Western Maryland counties,” said State Senator John J. Hafer (District 1). “This study provides a clear idea of what area businesses and state and local government officials can do to help remove the region’s technological deficit. With this knowledge we have the potential to boost existing businesses and ultimately encourage the arrival of new ones.”

Building upon TEDCO’s *eReadiness Maryland* project that determined Maryland’s western counties lagged behind the rest of the state in broadband accessibility and usage, the Western Maryland Broadband project was conducted to address a problem that challenges all of rural Maryland to some extent. TLA Associates, a Virginia-based telecommunications and network design firm, analyzed the region’s current communications infrastructure and demand, and then made recommendations on the best way to leverage existing assets and develop practical and economical solutions to resolve the region’s lack of competitive broadband access.

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Recommendations included:

- Encourage creating applications that require broadband usage, such as converged voice, data and video emergency services communications at a cost savings.
- Create a Maryland broadband authority to support public and private partnerships in infrastructure development, especially to underserved areas.
- Support local and state officials in their search for federal funds, including federal rebates to rural health care providers for broadband Internet usage.
- Promote the economic development of Western Maryland as a strategic location for remote information technology sites.
- Instead of working in rural “catch-up mode,” aim to place the region in a leadership role. Support entrepreneurship and business development that provide broadband services and infrastructure technology commercialization. Use next generation Internet resources to create virtual incubators for broadband intensive start-ups and high growth firms.
- Develop and support county or tri-county coordinators who understand public and private sector infrastructure and can coordinate, plan and procure funds for their growth.
- Encourage the state to modify current economic development incentives to attract external infrastructure funding and eliminate Maryland-only disincentives to the deployment of broadband infrastructure.

Leanne Mazer, executive director for the Tri-County Council of Western Maryland, said, “It is important that affordable broadband is available to our businesses in Western Maryland. Thanks to continued support from the offices of Senator Paul Sarbanes, Senator Barbara Mikulski and Congressman Roscoe Bartlett, as well as from Lieutenant Governor Michael Steele, House Minority Leader George Edwards and Delegate LeRoy E. Myers, we are closer to closing the affordability gap for broadband communications in the region.”

TLA Associates made their recommendations upon finding that a majority of Western Maryland’s businesses do not have accessibility to broadband communications at prices that are comparable to more populated regions of the State. More than half of the firms surveyed still use standard phone modems to conduct business, while 18 percent use a cable modem. Due to its lack of availability, only 6 percent use DSL. Of those without high-speed Internet access, 67 percent of businesses surveyed said they would purchase the service if it were available at prices similar to urban areas. However, since the survey was completed, Verizon announced an expansion of DSL service offerings in the Western Maryland region.

Businesses representing the region’s largest economic growth potential—those with mission critical applications such as data and medical services—are unable to obtain the communications services that fit their needs. These types of businesses, which often require several T-1s, are growing quickly and are willing to buy additional capacity to ensure that they have little downtime. The study showed that demand for broadband is already increasing among local government and non-business users, and that usage could attract service offerings from providers that could potentially be shared with the region’s businesses.

**A full copy of the report is available at <http://www.marylandtedco.org/WesternMD.htm> and <http://www.tccwmd.org/news.html>**

**Tri-County Council for Western Maryland** supports local government within the tri-county region. The primary focus of this support is in the areas of economic development, planning, tourism and intergovernmental cooperation. As the Local Development District for Western Maryland the Council has taken a proactive role in working with local, state and federal agencies to enhance the opportunities for the people of this region. For more information, visit [www.tccwmd.org](http://www.tccwmd.org).

**The Maryland Technology Development Corporation (TEDCO)**, a specialized technology transfer arm of the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development, was established by the General Assembly as a tool for Maryland to use in maintaining and enhancing its reputation as a leader in technology. TEDCO's mission is to foster the development of a technology economy that will create and sustain businesses throughout all regions in the State of Maryland. Currently, TEDCO has programs that aid and promote state-funded incubators, and federal and university laboratories to increase technology transfer and Maryland's eCommerce. For more information on TEDCO, visit its updated web site that includes better access to information on programs and resources at [www.MarylandTEDCO.org](http://www.MarylandTEDCO.org).

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