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PROJECT BRINGS WIFI HOT SPOTS TO CITY PARKS

WiFi hot spots have been created at five parks and two facilities in Norton.

NORTON - Norton City Schools' students and others needing access to the Internet can now find connectivity at several outdoor spaces, thanks to a collaborative effort that has brought WiFi hot spots to five green spaces and two city facilities.

At a Norton City Council meeting on Jan. 19, Norton City officials announced hot spots had been created at five parks – 11th Street, Locust Avenue, Ramsey, Clear Creek, and Pine Hill – as well as outside Norton City Hall and J.I. Burton High School. Future plans involve installing a hot spot outside Norton Elementary and Middle School.

The project followed the aftershocks from the COVID-19 pandemic that changed the way businesses, schools, governments, and everyday life functioned.

At a recent Norton City Council meeting, City Manager Fred Ramey noted the pandemic forced everyone “to step back and think about everything we did on a day-to-day basis and how we had to change and operate a bit differently.”

Providing students virtual learning options was one challenge the Norton City School System faced as some students opted to attend class from home in response to the pandemic.

Norton Elementary and Middle School Principal Scott Addison told Norton City Council on Jan. 19 that the school system did not know what education would look like with COVID-19. However, the lack of infrastructure in place statewide, especially for providing Internet access for distanced learning, was readily apparent.

Addison said studies conducted since March 2020 - when the pandemic began impacting everyday life in the U.S.- had found 1 in 5 Virginia students in grades K-12 did not have access to high-speed Internet and some had no access to a computer at home. Access to the Internet and computers are a necessity, added Addison, “not only for distanced education but also for a lot of assignments they (students) have had to do virtually because of other constraints in education.”

Students living in rural areas are at an even greater disadvantage when it comes to having broadband Internet access. Addison said 20 percent of rural students lack broadband access compared to less than 10 percent of students living in urban areas. In a survey conducted by Norton City Schools, Addison said 97 percent of respondents reported having Internet access, but 16.9 percent relied on a cellphone as their primary tool for accessing the Internet. This also presents connectivity challenges, he noted, from

data caps to parents not being home, leaving students without access to the phone. In addition, 4 percent of survey respondents reported having no access to Internet at home.

In response, Norton City Schools officials approached the City of Norton about possibly installing WiFi hot spots at some city parks. Both the school division and city had received funds through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act. The two entities decided to apply some of the CARES funding each had received to provide WiFi hot spots at several city sites.

The project's total cost was approximately \$38,000, with CARES funding covering \$37,627 and a \$1,500 grant from United Way of Southwest Virginia also assisting. The City of Norton paid for the equipment and installation, and Norton City Schools covered the cost for providing Internet service. Addison said the division was able to pay for Internet service at all parks for a five-year period. Other project partners included the Norton Redevelopment and Housing Authority, which allowed access and use of its properties at two parks and Scott County Telephone Cooperative, which installed the equipment.

"With this joint project, we were able to make our CARES funding work together to address an issue that was of great concern for our community and students, and we did so with a spirit of unity," said Gina Wohlford, Norton City Schools' superintendent. "Our children and families will benefit from this endeavor for years to come. As much as we may dislike many aspects of this pandemic, it has brought the issue of inequities in technology to light in the education sector for rural communities across Virginia, and initiated a focus on ways to improve them."

Norton City Manager Fred Ramey added, "although the initial focus was to assist Norton City Schools in addressing one of the logistical challenges associated with virtual learning, it is readily apparent that the hot spot infrastructure that has been installed through our partnership will pay dividends to our students, citizens, and visitors for years to come."