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Grays Harbor PUD and Summit Pacific Seek Grants to Expand East County Telecom

(ELMA, WA) – The Grays Harbor PUD and Summit Pacific Medical Center are seeking a pair of grants that when combined will expand the utility telecommunications network in East Grays Harbor County and the telehealth capabilities of the hospital district.

“In the current circumstances, the need for a robust and extensive fiber network is more important than ever,” said PUD Core Services Director Rob Hanny, whose office oversees the PUD Telecommunications Department. “The combined efforts of the PUD and Summit Pacific have the potential to address several areas of need for this area. Utility service, public health, economic development, the tribal community, and education could all see a positive impact if our partnership is successful.”

In seeking the \$1.5-million Public Works Board grant, the PUD is continuing its fiber expansion efforts by bringing the utility fiber network into the communities of Cedarville, Porter, Malone and Oakville; areas that have been underserved in the area of internet access for several years. The most immediate benefit for the utility will be the connection of the Cedarville substation to the PUD fiber network, improving utility response time to outages and other service needs. A collateral impact of the expansion will be improved connections for area businesses, schools, farms, tribal community, and emergency response systems.

“A strong fiber network is the key to economic development in this area, but with so much business and education being done from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes a vital need for the entire area,” said Hanny. “We’ve heard stories of residents having to drive into Elma, just to check email and send in homework assignments. If businesses can’t connect with customers and students can’t attend online classes, you can’t expect them to cope with this crisis.”

The expansion of the fiber network down the Chehalis River Valley will also be a major benefit to patients of Summit Pacific Medical Center, who are now able to request virtual healthcare visits if they aren’t wanting to go out in public. Summit Pacific is seeking a grant to expand their telehealth services and capabilities to better support these efforts.

Summit Pacific’s Director of Care Innovation, Jennifer Brackeen shared, "Summit Pacific aims to expand access to patients by enhancing our telemedicine infrastructure and capabilities through our

partnership with the Grays Harbor Public Utility District. Summit patients live all over Grays Harbor from McCleary to Westport. Some of them live in more remote areas such as Porter and Cedarville where internet access is less than ideal. We want patients to be able to have access to virtual health care across the county."

In early May, *health* care providers began seeing an alarming trend of people delaying care for injuries and worrisome symptoms – sometimes leading to hospitalizations that could have been avoided with earlier care. The reasons for delaying care include concerns about a higher risk for COVID-19 infection and worries that healthcare teams were too busy for them.

"What we don't want to see is patients putting off their routine healthcare visits and putting themselves at increased risk of health crisis. While we have taken extra precautions to ensure the safety of our patients, we understand their concerns," says Brackeen. "The combination of improving broadband access and mobile hot spots with increased access to care will get us one step closer to being the healthiest community in the Nation."

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Summit Pacific's vision is "Through Summit Care, we will build the healthiest community in the Nation." We passionately provide essential healthcare to all individuals of our community with an emphasis on quality, access and compassion. Summit Pacific operates a Level IV Critical Access Hospital with 24-hour emergency services, rural healthcare clinics, an urgent care clinic and offers physical and occupational therapy, laboratory services, diagnostic imaging, a swing bed program and more. To learn more about Summit Pacific, visit www.sp-mc.org.