



VTX1 Companies

# COMPASS

VOL. 3, NO. 4



## Working together

RGV Partnership builds strong communities

FIBER COMES TO CALLIHAM



RURAL RETREATS



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

# Any room can be a classroom

## Broadband opens a world of new educational opportunities

Soon, students will end summer break and return to classrooms and, in communities fortunate enough to be served by a member of NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association, they will have advantages once thought impossible in rural areas.

While fast, reliable broadband service creates opportunity for everyone, our students benefit significantly. Resources that were simply unavailable before are now only a few clicks away.

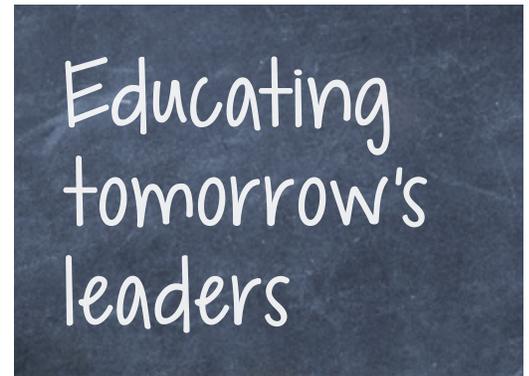
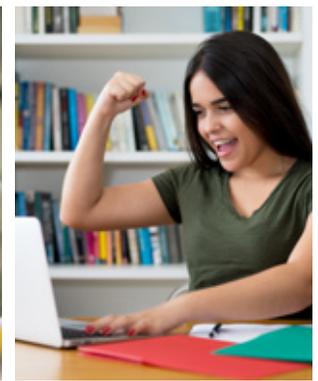
Once, learning about great art meant gazing at photos in a book. Now, students can take virtual tours through the greatest museums on Earth and, hopefully, find inspiration in the masters of the art world. Resources like Project Gutenberg make classic books a click and download away.

Digital resources also go far beyond virtual libraries and museums. Thanks to distance learning — real-time sessions connected through video — students in the most remote communities can tap into advanced or specialized classes otherwise unavailable in their area.

One key focus, and an acronym, you may have heard a lot about is STEM — science, technology, engineering and math. The skills learned in classes such as these are foundational. They can open the door to a range of jobs, higher education opportunities and more.

At the NTCA, we hear stories of these successes daily, because our members, including your communications provider, make a tangible difference in the lives of those they serve. The more tools we provide our students — the people who will become our future leaders and innovators — the richer our communities will become.

Every day, our NTCA members work to make that future a reality. 



# Welcoming clouds

Digital storage brightens the day



Whether sharing work files, snapping photos with your phone or dozens of other actions, your digital data most likely doesn't remain solely on your device. Instead, those files were probably shared through a cloud-based service. Similarly, most phones default to backing up your photos to the cloud.

In fact, the cloud is one critical presence in our digital lives, an experience often so seamless you might not even realize it's there.

But, exactly what is the cloud, and how does it work? Think of it as a collection of computers designed not only to store critical data, but also to back it up securely and deliver it on demand to whatever device you choose. That's how you're able to work on the same file at home as you would at school, at an office or just on the go with a mobile device.

## HOW IT WORKS

When you subscribe to a cloud provider such as Apple, Dropbox, Google, Microsoft or many others, you can upload files to a data server managed by that company. In some cases, the files are both on your device and in the cloud. Or, they may strictly be in the cloud, saving room on your device. These files can be photos, videos, documents with text, emails or more. As long as your device is connected to the internet and you are logged into the service, you can access this digital library. The cloud providers work hard to make it all as seamless as possible.

## CLOUD ADVANTAGES

Cloud storage saves space on your devices. It's also a good way to preserve files as a backup. Rather than keep one copy of

your data, cloud services keep multiple copies on many machines to create as reliable a system as possible.

Many businesses use cloud storage to offload the responsibility of managing physical servers or running complex software. Another benefit of using the cloud is that you can increase or decrease storage based on how much you need, matching the price of the service to your requirements.

## EXAMPLES

Apple's iCloud, Microsoft's OneDrive and Google Drive are popular cloud storage options for individuals. Cloud storage is also used by social media and entertainment companies to provide services to the public. For example, Facebook manages its own private cloud services and data centers. Instagram and Pinterest are also cloud-based. If you've ever used Netflix to watch movies, then you were also using a cloud computing service.

Popular personal use of cloud storage includes family photos and important financial documents such as tax returns. Businesses might use cloud storage for employee files, financial data such as payroll and to store customer data.

## BACK UP THE CRITICAL FILES

Cloud storage provides a range of benefits, but with vital information — anything from wills to family photos, digital art and beyond — consider the cloud as just one part good digital housekeeping. Consider creating three versions of these files: one in the cloud, a second on a computer hard drive and a third on an external drive. Rely on the cloud for convenience, but keep backup for, well, a rainy day. ☔

# Balancing act

Virtual and real-world connections build communities

**C**onnections make our lives better. Whether it's a friend, family member or someone offering a helping hand or a kind sentiment, positive interactions can lift our spirits and enhance our sense of community.



**PATRICK MCDONNELL**  
Chief Executive Officer

Have you even stopped to think that virtual connections, through social media, video calls or shared experiences like streaming — can create meaningful relationships? For example, gamers build rich, interactive communities. Online dating services are responsible for thousands of relationships and marriages. Career-focused sites promote networking among professionals. The potential can seem limitless.

While there are many ways to make these critical human connections online, balance is still important. After all, there really can be too much of a good thing.

Nielsen, a company that tracks how Americans watch TV and consume other media, recently released a report with some striking numbers. Between February 2021 and

February 2022, the average time spent streaming television in the U.S. increased by 18%. That translates to an average of just less than 170 billion minutes of weekly video viewing.

As a company that works hard to provide high-quality internet service to make that experience as seamless as possible, those numbers reflect a clear success for our industry. There was an interesting twist — 46% of people responding to the survey found it hard to find the content they want and said there are too many streaming services to choose from. Have you ever had a friend raving about a show you've never heard of because you don't have access to the service where it is available? You're not alone.

What do streaming TV and personal connections have in common? It proves that more is not always better, and taking a mindful approach in accessing all the online resources may be best. Ensure you strike a balance between the virtual world and the physical world.

The same idea applies to many online destinations. Social media sites can be informative, engaging and create real ties to those who might otherwise be lost to the passing of time or long distances. Thanks to digital tools, work can become ever-present, even during hours meant for rest or family.

The McClean Hospital, an expert mental health organization affiliated with Harvard Medical School, addresses this "digital burnout." They suggest occasionally taking time to power down. Don't respond immediately to all messages. Unplug completely from work during off-hours. Select your online accounts and keep the only ones that add true value. Most importantly, when you can, opt for face-to-face interactions.

Our community is rich and vital, because of the people who live and work around us. If we're thoughtful, the wealth of digital tools that are only a click away will make us even stronger and allow us to build, support and maintain the connections that matter.

Sincerely,

Patrick McDonnell  
CEO, VTX1 Companies



VTX1 Companies

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**Hours of Operation:**

- Business Offices:  
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On the Cover:



RGV Partnership Administrative Assistant Mayra Peña provides information on the organization to VTX1's Jennifer Crist. See story Page 8.



## JAMES MANN RETIRES FROM BOARD OF DIRECTORS



In 1975, James Mann became a member of the Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. Board of Directors representing District 9 — the San Miguel and Tilden exchanges. Now, after 47 years of service, he is hanging up his hat and retiring.

"I have learned a lot about the telecommunications industry and how it has evolved," Mann says. "When things went digital, everything changed,

and every few years, you can see the changes happening. As a director, it has been a neat position to be in. My concern for our members was always how to build service that was better, faster and safer."

Mann and his wife, Janie Sabrina, raised two children, Zachary and Rachel, on the family farm in Bigfoot. They now have two grandchildren, as well.

Mann served in the U.S. Air Force from 1963-67, and while he learned much from the experience, he says the biggest thing the military taught him was that he wanted to be self-employed. So, he decided to take on the family farming business, Otto Mann Jr. & Son Inc. Over the years, he earned many accolades and held various posts in farm-related associations. He retired from farming in 2006, and his son has since taken over the operation.

How will Mann spend his retirement? He and his wife would like to travel more, and he plans to tinker in his workshop, repairing broken items and completing woodworking projects. He may also spend time volunteering at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church where he is a devoted parishioner.

"A lot of people don't know that James was in radio electronics maintenance in the Air Force, and that gave him a strong love and appreciation for what we do in our everyday business," says recently retired VTX1 CEO Dave Osborn. "We attended the same Air Force training school in Mississippi, which gave us a common bond from the beginning of my tenure. We had many good talks about how much the technology has changed — particularly in recent years. James made a huge contribution to our business, and I thank him for his assistance and dedication to the company."

VTX1 thanks Mann for his years of dedicated service to the cooperative and its members and for leading by example. We're certain his future will remain close to the family farm, and we know that's right where he belongs.

## AFFORDABLE CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM

The Affordable Connectivity Program is an FCC program that helps reduce the cost of internet service for low-income households.

### The benefit provides:

- A monthly discount of up to \$30 for internet service

### Who qualifies?

A household is eligible to if one member meets at least one of the following criteria:

- Has an income that is at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines
- Participates in assistance programs, such as SNAP, Medicaid, federal public housing assistance, SSI, WIC or Lifeline
- Is approved to receive benefits under the free and reduced-price school lunch program or the school breakfast program, including through the USDA Community Eligibility Provision
- Received a federal Pell Grant during the current award year
- Meets the eligibility criteria for a participating broadband provider's existing low-income program

### To enroll:

- Go to [ACPBenefit.org](https://www.acpbenefit.org) to submit an application or print out a mail-in form.
- Contact VTX1 to select an eligible plan and have the discount applied to your bill.

To learn more, call 877-384-2575 or visit [fcc.gov/acp](https://www.fcc.gov/acp).



# find time to unwind

## Recharging at Texas retreats

Story by ANNE BRALY

Getting away from it all in the wide-open expanse of the Lone Star State is a time-honored tradition that Texans, long known for their sense of adventure, hold dear.

Here are some tips from Mary Bemis, founder of *American Spa* magazine, on making the most of your retreat.

Extreme experiences – Check your good sense at the door, and if it doesn't feel right, speak up and don't do it.

The setting – Think about what kind of environment makes you feel safe. Going to a place without cell service, phone service

or internet can be liberating – or just anxiety-inducing.

A good retreat is often a well-marked path. You should know where you're going and what lies ahead. Prepare and take necessary precautions.

Busy amusement parks and crowded white sand beaches have their charms, but when you really want to relax and recharge, nothing beats a rural getaway and relaxing retreat to secluded locales with attentive staff and a whole lot of pampering. And in Texas, there's a lot from which to choose.



“From quiet, rural escapes to chic, modern wellness retreats, Texas offers a variety of options for those seeking to refresh their physical and mental well-being,” says Tim Fennell, director of Travel Texas Tourism. “Relaxation getaways and retreats in Texas have always been popular types of leisure travel for travelers seeking to recharge, reconnect and reset.”

Whether it's waking up to the views of the water or hearing the birds as they begin their day, take a step outside the city and you'll find retreats in the Lone Star State that offer just what you may need to get away from the busyness of life and the mental quagmire brought on by fist-bumping, social distancing and other pandemic protocols.

Here are some excellent examples of what's in store as you step off of life's beaten path.



Left: Enjoy a glass of wine at The Vineyard at Florence. Above and inset: Visitors can enjoy the views and relaxing evenings by the fire at Lakeway Resort and Spa.



## LAKEWAY RESORT AND SPA

Lakeway

As the only resort nestled on the banks of Lake Travis in the Texas Hill Country, the 168-room Lakeway Resort and Spa offers a distinct getaway with a hint of the urban allure of nearby Austin. Whether it's wrapping your body in nourishing oils or massaging that tension in your back, a visit to the spa is a must. The spa's position on the shore of Lake Travis, as well as its floor-to-ceiling windows, offer dramatic views that tease the senses.

Two pools offer a choice. Want a break from the kids? They have their own pool where they can play on the waterslide and splash pad as you enjoy quiet moments of your own or a cooling drink at the swim-up bar.

There are options for all ages in one of several restaurants, from casual poolside dining to a more indulgent dinner at TR Restaurant Bar and Lounge serving comfort food and cocktails.

► Visit [lakewayresortandspas.com](http://lakewayresortandspas.com) for more information.

## HOTEL RITUAL AND WELLNESS CENTER

Jacksonville

RITUAL is a retreat that will become a habit if you're in need of a magical experience. Bring a book and escape to wherever its pages take you. Soak in the heated pool and hot tub with a bartender at the ready. Then, go for some detox in the sauna, mineral water provided.

Gourmet breakfast is available at RITUAL, and there's a lively luncheonette where you can order salads, sandwiches or a beautiful bowl of warm peach pudding.

► For bookings and information, visit [ritualonmain.com](http://ritualonmain.com).

At Rancho Cortez, barrel racing brings excitement.

## RANCHO CORTEZ

Bandera

If there's one retreat that screams "TEXAS!" it's Rancho Cortez. Visitors can restore their wellness the Western way at Rancho Cortez's Cowboy Wellness Program.

Ready for the roundup? The retreat's wellness program offers guests traditional wellness retreat experiences like hiking, outdoor workouts, nutrition classes and conditioned yoga and strength training, along with opportunities to explore the ranch by horseback. You can also feed the longhorns, relax by the campfire, soak in the hot tub or take a dip in the pool.

The dude ranch is open to day trips and also offers a two-week fitness program with strength training, pilates, yoga and more. Or, if you can commit, there's a 60-day program that will totally change your life. However, if you simply need a night or two to get away, the ranch offers a variety of overnight experiences, including a bunk house that sleeps up to 15 people.

All activities and meals are part of an overnight stay, and there's no sleeping in, cowboy. Breakfast is served at 8 a.m.

► To book, visit [ranhocortez.com](http://ranhocortez.com).

## THE VINEYARD AT FLORENCE

Florence

It's a pleasure to wake up to the view of vineyards and luxuriate in comfortable linens. The Vineyard at Florence is like having your own small piece of Tuscany in Texas Hill Country.

The Vineyard at Florence is a retreat for the senses with its old-world Italian architecture and a spa offering facials and massages. Enjoy the farm-to-fork menu at its signature restaurant, Farmer's Commons, with its local honey, goat cheese from a nearby farm, a menu driven by what's in season and, naturally, a lovely wine list.

Each of the rooms and suites has either a patio or balcony, as well as a coffee bar, flat-screen television, refrigerator and walk-in, tiled shower. Suites also have a fireplace. The Winemakers Villa sleeps up to 10 people and is the perfect setting for a family retreat with its five bedrooms, three baths, living room with fireplace and fully stocked kitchen. Best of all, it overlooks the vineyard and has the best view on the property.

Florence is less than an hour from Austin, but there's plenty to keep you busy on-site with great places for picnicking, a swimming pool, biking and hiking. Or, arrange for a wine tasting. At night, sit back, look up and enjoy the night sky deep in the heart of Texas.

► For bookings or information, visit [thevineyardatflorence.com](http://thevineyardatflorence.com). 📞

# A SHARED VISION

RGV Partnership unites stakeholders to make South

Story by LUIS CARRASCO



Working to promote economic development, community growth and increase the region's prosperity through advocacy and engagement, the RGV Partnership brings together like-minded business leaders from across the Rio Grande Valley.

Tracing its origins back to 1944, the partnership's initial focus was agriculture. As the Valley grew and business interests expanded, so did the group's reach. "It started with the goals of supporting our ranchers, irrigators and farmers secure access to water and roadways and to help initiatives at the time," says Sergio Contreras, the partnership's former president and CEO. "Over the years, it evolved into a chamber of commerce, driving collaboration and engagement across our four-county region."

Eventually, the Rio Grande Valley Chamber of Commerce transitioned into the RGV Partnership and became more of an advocacy and economic development organization, Contreras says, supporting



Left: The partnership uses vintage images from the Rio Grande Valley's past to showcase the region's progress over the years.

Below: RGV Partnership former President and CEO Sergio Contreras, from left, meets with administrative assistants Mayra Peña and Mary Garcia to plan upcoming events.

members in Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy and Cameron counties. Today, about 1.5 million people call the Valley home. The population is predominantly Hispanic and skews young, offering the region a dynamic workforce as well as a host of opportunities and challenges in everything from education to health care. Because of its proximity to the border, the Valley is also closely tied to immigration and international trade.

The RGV Partnership's membership is as diverse as the industries in the Valley. Its



# FOR THE FUTURE

## Texas shine

board of directors is made up of business leaders from the community's financial, educational, construction, health and telecommunications sectors. The group's areas of focus reflect its membership's priorities and include economic development, education and workforce transportation along with infrastructure, international trade, and health care.

Education is one of the key issues for the partnership, Contreras said, not only in helping build a college-educated workforce, but also supporting different pathways to a successful career and a good-paying job. "We are adjusting and working with our school districts and colleges to let students know they don't necessarily need a four-year degree to dive into the jobs we have here, which are growing," he says. "For example, there are multiple health care jobs that don't require four-year degrees. Also, in construction, there's entry-level certification training that one can get."

A look at how the partnership addresses the valley's educational needs shows how it works on issues critical to the community. "There are different components that we use as resources. One is having conversations and business roundtables with stakeholders and decision-makers who can provide

funding," Contreras says. "We also provide direct funding from our foundation to colleges for certain entry-level degrees and certifications, as well as additional funding to help meet that gap for students who may need that to get access to that training."

When it comes to the border, the partnership relies on its relationships with local, state and federal officials. Texas was the largest state exporter of goods in 2018 with more than a third of exports — worth \$109.7 billion — going to Mexico, according to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

Shoppers and tourists from across the border and imports, especially produce, are also important economic drivers in the region. "The question there is how do we maximize the efforts when it comes to trade? One is to create awareness of the importance of our ports of entry — create an awareness that we need additional funding to improve and upgrade our ports," Contreras says. "Where we need support at the federal level is additional staffing of Customs and Border Protection agents to ensure that they expedite and reduce wait times."

### BROADBAND CONNECTIONS

VTX1 has supported the RGV Partnership for decades and continues to play an active role in the organization. Patrick McDonnell, VTX1's Chief Executive Officer, is a member of the partnership's executive board, currently serving as chairman-elect.

Contreras says VTX1 is a vital player in

the development and improvement of the Valley, providing vital services that help empower the community. Reliable internet service, for example, was more important than ever as the spread of COVID-19 forced people to work and learn from home. "As the pandemic hit, they were laser focused, ensuring that they expedited the services that our students needed, that our schools needed, our universities and businesses," he says. "And they continue to invest with a workforce that's committed to our region, as I've seen many of their employees out in the community."

Contreras knows the significance of having a connected community, and his perspective and expertise have not gone unnoticed. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick recently named Contreras to the Texas Broadband Development Office Board of Advisors. Working under the state comptroller, the office awards grants, low-interest loans and other incentives to provide broadband internet in underserved areas. "COVID exposed gaps, so there are needs," Contreras says. "The state has made it a priority to ensure that Texas continues to be competitive and excels in broadband development."

As the economy emerges from the pandemic and things begin to return to normal, the RGV Partnership is ready to continue serving the Rio Grande Valley as it has done for almost 80 years — supporting businesses and helping the four-county region face the challenges of today and tomorrow." 📧



## Check it out!

To learn more about the Weslaco-based RGV Partnership, go to [rgvpartnership.com](http://rgvpartnership.com) or follow the organization on Facebook.

# Back to School

Story by LISA SAVAGE



**★ Make sure you have adequate internet speeds for students studying at home**

Many schools now offer more options for virtual days and online learning, whether it's for severe weather outbreaks, sick days or a family that has discovered that online learning works best for their child.

As a result, a reliable home internet service is more important than ever, whether it's for students who need to access online assignments, parents working remotely or for streaming movies and shows.

The Federal Communications Commission offers some tips to optimize your home network performance:

## CHECK YOUR INTERNET PLAN

Check with your internet provider to find out the speed in your plan. Make sure it's enough to handle all the devices that might be connected at the same time, as well as any additional devices that could be added, such as televisions for streaming, laptops and more. FCC consumer guides provide information about household broadband use and broadband speeds.

## TEST YOUR SPEED

In many cases, your internet provider has a speed test on the company website, or you can download broadband speed test apps or visit speed test websites, to check your current broadband download and upload speeds. Many providers, especially rural telecommunications cooperatives, strive

to keep download and upload speeds close to the same, which is important when it comes to online meeting platforms, which require higher upload speeds. Some national providers offer deals to get new customers, advertising high speeds. In reality, they may be referring only to download speed.

## TROUBLESHOOTING

In most homes, internet service comes to the house and then operates through a wireless signal called Wi-Fi, which distributes the broadband throughout the home on a device called a router. Using multiple wireless devices on the same Wi-Fi network can impact performance.

Sometimes, rebooting the router — turning it off and then turning it back on — can resolve the problem.

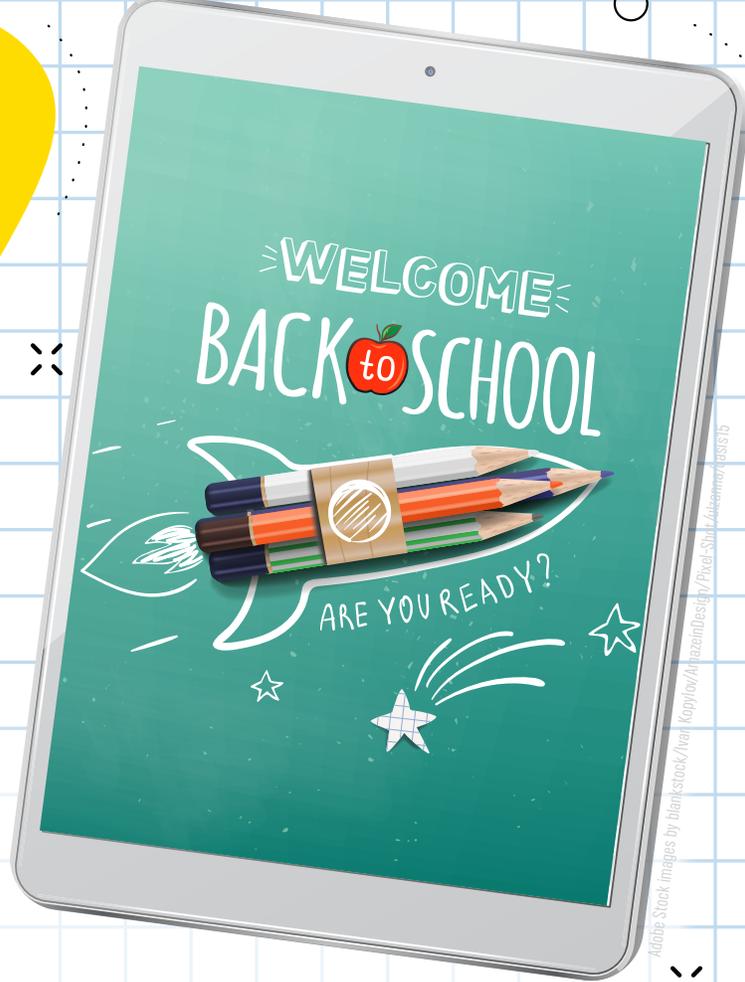
If your internet provider doesn't supply the router, make sure it isn't outdated. Check the model number on the router to see if it's capable of providing the speed you're paying for. If your internet speed seems slower than it should be, contact your provider for troubleshooting tips, or ask if there are any outages or disruptions that could impact speed.

Whether they're in the classroom or learning virtually, almost all students need access to the internet to reach their potential. Making sure your broadband network provides the speeds they need is a big step in the right direction. 📧

# Connected classrooms

Teachers maximize communication with students and parents

Story by LISA SAVAGE



How many times has this happened, parents?

You're running late as you get ready to leave home and drop the kids off at school as you rush to work.

As you go through your mental checklist, you think you're doing OK, and then your child says, "I forgot to study for my spelling test." The teacher sent the list of spelling words home on a note that's shoved deep into your child's backpack.

Now, the educational world is changing, using apps for classroom reminders, school activities and even payment in advance for athletic and other school events.

While many teachers still send notes and schedules home on paper, they also communicate the same information through apps.

Apps like Remind allow teachers and coaches to send out information about class assignments or practice schedules. Messages can be sent to a group or to individuals. About 80% of schools in the United States use Remind to connect students, teachers and families. It's designed for grades K-12 to communicate with everyone at once, and it has 20 million monthly active users across the United States.

Parents like the app because they receive early closing notifications instantaneously. All parents don't always see reminders that go out on social media.

The app reminds parents of homework assignments, dress up days and more.

It can lead to more participation in the classroom when parents get reminders because not all students show notes to their parents, and not all parents go through their children's backpacks to find them.

ClassDojo has typically been used for younger students and has group messaging and individual options, so the group may not necessarily see responses.

The app has messaging for group story posts, as well as individual student portfolios where teachers can assign work and students can turn in assignments. It also translates into over 35 languages.

Talking Points also features translation and options to communicate with families in their home languages to build strong partnerships during the school year.

Many school systems utilize platforms like Google Classroom, which also has access to such options as Google Voice for communication with students and their parents. For extracurricular activities like athletic events or stage performances, some school systems utilize GoFan, an app that offers online ticket purchases.

More and more schools are opting for the app purchase to avoid cash transactions. Some schools no longer even accept cash payments at the gate for events.

Since 2001, GoFan and its parent company, Huddle Tickets, have worked with over 10,000 schools selling over 20 million tickets — more digital high school tickets than any other company.

Other companies offer similar purchase availabilities through an app.

Parents, as another school year is about to begin, make sure you have the tools necessary to make meaningful connections with your child's teachers and school system.



From classroom reminders to athletic tickets, apps are increasingly essential.

# A GROWING

## Public-private partnership brings VTX1 fiber service to Calliham

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

As a rural community of fewer than 100 homes and businesses, Calliham isn't the kind of place where most telecommunications companies would make the investment to build a fiber optic internet network. But, thanks to the dedication of local officials and a partnership with VTX1 Companies, Calliham residents now have access to fiber internet speeds that rival — or even outshine — what's available in big cities.

"I very much believe in Calliham and its residents, and I want them to enjoy the same internet that I do in my office and home in Tilden," says McMullen County Judge James E. Teal. "I really believe that's the wave of the future."

Teal, the county's top executive, spent the better part of a decade trying to bring state-of-the-art fiber internet service to the unincorporated community. "That's been a big push for a long time for me," he says. "We have a community where we've had a hard time just manning the volunteer fire department because of the small population. If we're ever going to attract new people to the area, fiber to the home is a massive selling point."

### HISTORY OF CALLIHAM

Calliham's original location is now the bottom of Choke Canyon Lake. When



McMullen County Judge James E. Teal.

the federal Bureau of Reclamation started constructing the reservoir in the late 1970s, "New Calliham," as locals called it, was built nearby for the displaced residents, the majority of whom were elderly.

Over the decades, new arrivals in Calliham were mostly retirees. Low taxes and the fishing and recreational

finally got the opportunity he'd been waiting for when Congress passed the COVID-19 stimulus plan last year. The American Rescue Plan Act authorized \$1.9 trillion to help communities across the country recover from the economic and health effects of the pandemic.

"When we learned the rules included funding for broadband, I immediately

knew that this was the project for this," Teal says. With ARPA money and funding from the county's own coffers in place, Teal approached VTX1 with a proposal to split the cost of the project.

VTX1 officials embraced the chance to work together. "Overall, we felt the project was a good opportunity for us to fulfill our original rural mission of



A public meeting to explain the fiber project drew a crowd of interested Calliham residents.

opportunities at the nearby lake attracted them to the area. "There's a community center, a post office and about 90 people," Teal says. "It's very, very small."

But the judge was determined that small didn't have to mean insignificant.

### SEIZING AN OPPORTUNITY

After years of hearing that bringing fiber to Calliham was too costly, Teal

serving the underserved by going to this area," says VTX1 Chief Executive Officer Patrick McDonnell.

Fiber builds are expensive undertakings, costing between \$70,000 and \$75,000 per mile. The Calliham project carries a price tag of about \$450,000, and McDonnell says pooling financial resources with the county was the only way to get it done. "Just doing

# NETWORK



VTX1 officials and board members joined McMullen County representatives at a community meeting to announce the expansion of VTX1's fiber network into Calliham.

According to Teal, the meeting went a long way toward putting residents' lingering concerns to rest, and the project has been embraced enthusiastically by the community, not just for its short-term benefits, but also for what fiber broadband could

mean for Calliham's future. "This is a great vitalization of the community," Teal says. "It's an unbelievable quality-of-life improvement." 🗨️

it on our own was not economically feasible. I don't think we would ever get our money back out of the project for that small and that spread-out of an area," he says. "But, a public-private partnership allowed us to bridge that gap of economic viability. That's what really led us to the project."

Fiber construction crews broke ground in March with an anticipated June completion date. When finished, the 96 prospective VTX1 customers in Calliham will have access to fiber internet with speeds up to 1 gig. Installation dates at individual addresses will vary, but McDonnell is hopeful to have some customers online by early summer with connectivity for the rest shortly thereafter.

## 'LET'S DO WHAT THE OTHER GUYS WOULDN'T DO'

VTX1 has a decades-long history in McMullen County, and that includes providing fiber internet service to Tilden, the county seat. "They've been a community partner in McMullen County, gosh, since the '80s," Teal says. "We've been part of the VTX family for many, many years. They've been a faithful partner to us and really just a great asset to all of our folks."

Concern for the communities it serves is at the heart of VTX1's mission. Where the big internet service providers see figures on a spreadsheet telling them it's not profitable to build fiber to a small rural community like Calliham, VTX1 sees neighbors whose lives will benefit from that link to the world. "That puts us in the unique position, not only here but in many other areas, to say, 'Let's do what the other guys wouldn't do,'" says VTX1 Chief Technology Officer Sebastian Ivanisky. "I grew up in a small town myself, and one of the things that gives me personal gratification is to see these communities empowered by this kind of project."

## COMMUNITY RESPONSE

VTX1 held a successful public meeting in February when the company's board members visited Calliham to explain the project to residents and answer their questions. "I think one thing that really went over nicely is a lot of our board members are rural ranchers, farmers or business owners," McDonnell says. "They were able to talk one-on-one to the local residents about what fiber has done for them in their areas."

# Relishing SOMETHING NEW FOR veggies?

## Extending shelf life may leave you in a pickle

For thousands of years, we've relied on pickling as a means of food preservation and storage. Since then, it's evolved into a culinary trend that extends well beyond the standard spears and slices that make up dill or bread-and-butter pickles. You can pickle almost any fruit or veggie to create briny snacks, colorful relishes and tasty garnishes.

We all know cucumbers can become delicious pickles. But watermelon rind is wonderfully sweet pickled. Turnips, asparagus, beets, bell peppers, parsnips, peaches and peppers can taste great after the process, too.

Pickling extends the harvest season well into winter when we long for the flavors of the summer garden. So, don't throw away the watermelon rinds from your summer picnic, and when you pick that peck of peppers, don't forget to pickle a few. 🗨

### PICKLED PEACHES

- 3 cups sugar
- 2 cups distilled white vinegar
- 12 cinnamon sticks, divided
- 36 whole cloves, divided
- 18 soft peaches

In a large stainless steel stockpot over medium heat, bring 1 cup water, sugar, vinegar, 6 cinnamon sticks and 18 cloves to a boil, stirring to dissolve sugar. Reduce heat to medium-low and add peaches. Gently simmer, without boiling, until peaches are heated through and a fork pierces the fruit with no resistance, 10 to 15 minutes.

Using a slotted spoon, divide peaches among six sterilized, 1-pint canning jars, placing peaches pit-side down. Add 1 of the remaining cinnamon sticks and 3 of the remaining cloves to each jar. Ladle cooking liquid into jars, filling each to within 1/2 inch of rim. Wipe the lip of each jar rim with a clean, wet cloth to remove any syrup or bits of fruit. Then, top each jar with a flat lid and screw on a threaded ring band without tightening completely. Roll jars on their sides to release any air bubbles that might be trapped in the peach cavities. Turn upright. Remove ring bands and lids, and add more cooking liquid, if needed because of settling, to fill jars to within 1/2 inch of rim. Replace lids and threaded ring bands, tightening completely to seal. Store pickled peaches in refrigerator for up to eight weeks.





## WATERMELON RIND PICKLES

- 2 pounds watermelon rind
- 1/4 cup pickling salt
- 4 cups water, divided, plus more for boiling
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 1 cup white vinegar
- 1 tablespoon broken-up cinnamon stick
- 1 1/2 teaspoons whole cloves
- 1/2 lemon, thinly sliced
- 5 maraschino cherries, halved — optional

Trim the dark green and pink parts from the watermelon rind and discard. Cut rind into 1-inch cubes and measure out 7 cups.

Put the watermelon rind in a large container with the pickling salt and 3 cups of the water. Add more water to cover the rinds, if necessary. Soak overnight.

Drain and rinse watermelon rind.

Cover the rind with cold water in a large saucepan. Simmer just until tender, about 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, in a nonreactive 6- to 8-quart kettle, combine the sugar, vinegar, cinnamon, whole cloves and remaining 1 cup water. Simmer the mixture for 10 minutes. Strain and discard the solids.

Pour the strained liquid back into the pan. Add the drained watermelon rind, lemon slices and maraschino cherries. Simmer the mixture until the watermelon rind is translucent, about 30 minutes.

Fill half-pint jars with the hot watermelon rind and syrup mixture, leaving 1/2 inch of headspace. Add the lids. Process in a boiling water bath for 5 minutes, and remove jars. Let the jars cool on a rack. Serve and enjoy. Properly canned, watermelon pickles will keep in a cool, dark, dry place for at least a year.

*Note: If your jars didn't seal properly or you don't want to process them in boiling water, they will keep for about a month in the refrigerator.*

## REFRIGERATOR PICKLES

- 5 1/2 cups, about 1 1/2 pounds, thinly sliced (about 1/2-1/4-inch) pickling cucumbers
- 1 1/2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 1 cup thinly sliced sweet onion
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup white vinegar
- 1/2 cup apple cider vinegar
- 1/4 cup light brown sugar
- 1 1/2 teaspoons mustard seeds
- 1/2 teaspoon celery seeds
- 1/8 teaspoon ground turmeric

Combine cucumbers and salt in a large, shallow bowl. Cover and chill 1 1/2 hours. Move cucumbers into a colander and rinse thoroughly under cold water. Drain well and return cucumbers to bowl. Add onion to bowl and toss with the cucumbers.

Combine the granulated sugar, white vinegar, apple cider vinegar, brown sugar, mustard seeds, celery seeds and ground turmeric in a medium saucepan. Bring to a simmer over medium heat, stirring until the sugar dissolves.

Pour the hot vinegar mixture over cucumber mixture. Let stand at room temperature 1 hour. Cover and refrigerate 24 hours. Store in an airtight container in refrigerator up to one month.



## PICKLED BRUSSELS SPROUTS

- 1 pound Brussels sprouts
- 1 1/2 cups apple cider vinegar
- 1 cup water
- 1 tablespoon pickling salt
- 20 peppercorns, divided
- 1/4 teaspoon yellow mustard seeds, divided
- 2 garlic cloves
- 2 bay leaves

Trim the sprouts and cut them in half. Set aside. Combine vinegar, water and salt in a stainless steel pot and bring to a boil.

Divide the peppercorns, mustard seeds, garlic cloves and bay leaves between two prepared pint jars. Pack sprouts into jars and pour brine over the sprouts. Use a wooden chopstick to remove air bubbles from jars.

Wipe rims, apply lids and rings and process in a boiling water bath for 10 minutes.

When time is up, remove jars from canner and let cool on a folded towel. When jars are cool, test seals. If seals are good, jars can be stored in the pantry (any unsealed jars should be refrigerated). Give pickles at least 48 hours before you eat them, so that the brine fully penetrates the sprouts. Sealed jars will keep up to one year on the pantry shelf.



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