

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend Washington, on Tuesday, August 17. I'm Will O'Donnell, Communications Director for the Jefferson County Public Utility District #1, on the air today to tell you about some recent and exciting developments in expanding access to broadband in our county.

While the PUD supplies power to over twenty thousand homes and businesses, fewer than 50 customers get their internet from the PUD today. Actually, it's less than 50. Only around a dozen businesses purchase internet from the PUD. And not even internet, just connections to fiber optic cables the PUD owns. Those businesses in turn sell the connection to the end users, aka homes and businesses. Confused yet? It's been confusing to us too. That's part of why we don't have a lot of connections.

In fact the PUD has only been in the internet business for about 8 years, exactly the same amount of time it's been in the power business. In 2013, the same year the PUD became responsible for maintaining the power lines and providing you electricity, the PUD also acquired 25 miles of fiber optic cable running around Port Townsend and out to Port Hadlock.

And yet nearly every day for the last 8 years, customers from around the county have called the PUD asking to connect to fiber, or have the PUD build fiber in their neighborhood, or to ask the PUD to do something, anything, to help them get better, or ANY internet service. While Port Townsend and parts of Port Hadlock and Port Ludlow have access to high-speed internet, most of the county still only has not much better than dial-up connection over copper phone lines. Some can't even get that and pay for expensive cell or satellite services that might let them send email or watch a movie but can't provide the two-way instant data stream needed for online school or meetings.

For 5 of the last 8 years, the best the PUD could reasonably say to folks asking for help was that we were aware of their issues. For the last 3 years, we added that we were looking into it, to see what we could do. Now however, we are finally able to say that we are working on it. And that's because in the last six months the state of Washington has changed the laws to allow PUDs to both build and sell service, and because the federal government has released billions of dollars to help rural communities afford the high cost of building fiber directly to homes and businesses.

The PUD has already announced its first project: building fiber to over 1600 homes and businesses in Quilcene and Discovery Bay. If awarded funding, that project begins in 2022. We're also developing plans for extending fiber from Chimacum to the Coyle and back along Paradise Bay and Beaver Valley Road. And we're looking at options to make it easier to connect to that fiber we've already built between PT and Hadlock, reducing construction costs to increase the number of connections.

All of which is exciting – and for many – long overdue. But even in the best scenarios, it's going to be awhile before anyone sees a charge for internet service on their PUD bill. We'll keep you posted as developments and opportunities arise – on this radio station, on our website, and wherever else you get your news. You can also keep up with the latest developments from the PUD on Facebook, on Twitter, on Instagram, or directly from our website <https://www.jeffpud.org/>.

Thanks again, I'm Will O'Donnell, Communications Director. And stay tuned.