

**BEFORE THE WASHINGTON STATE
UTILITIES AND TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION**

In the Matter of the Petition of

MASHELL TELECOM, INC., d/b/a
RAINIER CONNECT OR THE RAINIER
GROUP,

Requesting distribution of funds from the
state universal communications services
program created in RCW 80.36.650

DOCKET UT-210599

ORDER 01

GRANTING DISTRIBUTION OF
FUNDS FROM THE STATE
UNIVERSAL COMMUNICATIONS
SERVICES PROGRAM

BACKGROUND

- ¹ On May 13, 2019, the Governor signed Second Substitute Senate Bill (SSSB) 5511, which addresses broadband service issues by: (a) creating the Governor’s State Broadband Office, (b) establishing a broadband grant and loan program administered by the Public Works Board, (c) revising the conditions in which a port district can offer telecommunication services, and (d) extending and revising the purpose of the State Universal Communications Services Program (State USF Program or Program).¹ The State USF Program is primarily intended to provide direct financial support to Washington’s small incumbent Class B Telephone companies that have adopted a plan to provide, enhance, and maintain broadband services in high-cost rural areas of Washington.²
- ² The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (Commission) is allotted \$5 million each year over the remaining three-year term of the program,³ and may distribute

¹ RCW 80.36.650(1) provides that “The purpose of the program is to support continued provision of basic telecommunications services under rates, terms, and conditions established by the commission and the provision, enhancement, and maintenance of broadband services, recognizing that, historically, the incumbent public network functions to provide all communications services including, but not limited to, voice and broadband services.”

² The legislation described above in (a) through (d) creates other opportunities for broadband expansion in addition to this program.

³ This is the eighth year of the program (year eight) and the next two years (nine and ten) make up the final “three-year term” discussed in Staff’s memo, consistent with the Commission’s Final Order adopting rules to implement legislation extending and modifying the State USF Program in Docket UT-190437.

up to \$5 million annually (less the Commission’s administrative costs) to qualifying companies each year through June 30, 2024.⁴

3 On May 27, 2020, the Commission entered General Order R-598 (Adoption Order) in Docket UT-190437 amending and adopting rules in Chapter 480-123 WAC to reconfigure the State USF Program in accordance with SSSB 5511.⁵

4 Paragraph 14 of the Adoption Order states that an “Eligible provider may now receive a distribution from the Program if they have adopted a plan to provide, enhance, or maintain broadband services in their service areas.” The Adoption Order further establishes four different eligibility criteria.⁶ In addition to these requirements, a company must comply with the prerequisites in WAC 480-123-100.⁷

5 A company accordingly must include in its petition a broadband plan that maintains, provides, or enhances broadband service within the provider’s service area.⁸ The rule also

⁴ RCW 80.36.650(2) provides that if less than \$5 million is expended in any fiscal year, the unexpended portion *must be carried over* to subsequent fiscal years and be available for program expenditures. This fiscal year, \$4,850,000 is available for distribution from the State USF Program.

⁵ The Adoption Order established minimum standards of 25 megabits per second download and 3 megabits per second upload (25/3 Mbps) for service to be considered high-speed broadband for the purpose of the State USF Program.

⁶ *Id.* at ¶¶ 16-22.

⁷ WAC 480-123-100 sets forth various criteria for requesting program support for wireline, wireless, and other communications providers. Wireline communications providers must: (a) be local exchange companies that serve fewer than 40,000 access lines within the state, (b) be an incumbent local exchange carrier, (c) offer basic residential and business telecommunications services, (d) have an established plan to provide, maintain, or enhance broadband service, and (e) be designated by the Commission as an ETC for the purposes of receiving federal universal service support.

⁸ To the extent applicable, a company’s broadband plan to provide, maintain or enhance service should include:

- (i) A multiyear investment plan;
- (ii) Specific project(s) that are projected to provide or enhance broadband services at speeds required by the Commission or the Federal Communications Commission. Project information should include an estimated timeline, geographic location, number of locations passed, and upload and download speeds;
- (iii) A plan for maintenance of broadband services in the provider’s service area;

requires a petitioning company to identify at least one of four eligibility criteria that it claims to satisfy.

6 The four eligibility criteria options are:

- 1) A sworn statement made by a company officer certifying that the provider commits to the deployment of broadband to the number of locations the Commission has determined by order. Such deployment obligations are in addition to any Federal Communications Commission deployment requirements. Additionally, a provider that elects to petition the program for support under this category is subject to review of its rate of return and financial reporting requirements.
- 2) A sworn statement by a company officer certifying that the provider commits to the deployment of broadband to the number of locations the Commission has determined by order. Such deployment obligations are in addition to any Federal Communications Commission deployment requirements.
- 3) A sworn statement by a company officer certifying that the provider has already met the Federal Communications Commission's total deployment obligations associated with federal high-cost program support as of the date of the petition, and that, since January 1, 2018, the provider has deployed broadband to the number of locations the Commission has determined by order. If a company has deployed broadband to a number of locations less than the number required by Commission order, the company must certify that it will deploy broadband to the remaining number of locations.
- 4) A sworn statement by a company officer certifying that broadband service is available to 100 percent of locations within the provider's service area, and that the company commits to making broadband service available to any new locations.

(iv) A description for how the provider will enhance broadband services in its service area; and

(v) Any supporting information that the Commission requests to assist its review and analysis of the provider's broadband plan.

- 7 On June 29, 2021, Mashell Telecom, Inc., d/b/a Rainier Connect or The Rainier Group, (Rainier Connect or Company) filed with the Commission its State USF compliance report. On July 28, 2021, the Company filed a revised report.⁹ In the report, Rainer Connect states that it continues to invest in tools, software, and hardware to install fiber service to additional locations. The Company has also invested in central office equipment and outside plant infrastructure to offer modern voice and broadband services throughout its service area. Based on its review and several conversations with the Company, Commission staff (Staff) believes the report meets the requirements of WAC 480-123-130.
- 8 On August 3, 2021, Rainer Connect filed a petition requesting support from the State USF Program (Petition) for fiscal year ending June 30, 2022, under eligibility criterion three. The Company filed a revised petition on September 15, 2021.¹⁰ Rainer Connect states in its broadband plan, that its fiber to the premise (FTTP) network provides 1G symmetrical service and the Company currently offers 25/3 Mbps to 60 percent of its 4,066 serviceable locations. By the end of 2022, Rainer Connect plans to deploy FTTP to an additional seven percent of its locations and over the next five years, it plans to expand the FTTP network to 28 percent of locations. The Company estimates that 5 percent of locations will not be eligible to FTTP due to cost constraints and will strategically place terminals to shorten loops and provide faster broadband service.
- 9 Staff reviewed Rainer Connect's Petition, supporting exhibits, including a broadband plan, and has determined that the Company meets the prerequisites for requesting program support set forth in WAC 480-123-100 and the third eligibility criterion. Overall, Staff finds that Rainer Connect certified its commitment to deploy broadband services to the number of locations in the Adoption Order,¹¹ in addition to any locations required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The Company provided a broadband plan to maintain its existing infrastructure while continuing to invest in capital

⁹ Rainer Connect's revised compliance report updated administrative errors, provided the number of broadband connections, provided more detail about the Company's "Use of Funds," and added additional required language consistent with WAC 480-123-120(5).

¹⁰ Rainer Connect's revised petition updated administrative errors, provided the number of broadband connections, provided more detail about the Company's "Use of Funds," and added additional required language consistent with WAC 480-123-120(5).

¹¹ Each company has a specific UTC Deployment Obligation based on its cost benchmark and the amount of anticipated support each company is potentially eligible to receive through June 30, 2024. For these calculations, Staff calculated that \$4,850,000 would be available annually for fiscal years 2022-2024.

improvements to make available broadband at speeds faster than 25/3 Mbps. Staff recommends the Commission find the Company eligible for State USF Program support in the amount of \$161,648 to be disbursed no later than December 31, 2021.

DISCUSSION AND DECISION

- 10 We agree with Staff that Rainer Connect has demonstrated its eligibility for a distribution from the State USF Program for fiscal year ending June 30, 2022.
- 11 The Company has certified it meets the FCC's total deployment obligations associated with federal high-cost support as of the date of the petition and that since January 1, 2018, it deployed broadband to the locations stated in the Adoption Order. The Company has shown in its compliance report the ability to provide and maintain services. Furthermore, Rainer Connect has provided a broadband plan to maintain current services while continuing to deploy broadband service throughout their service area. The Company committed in its petition to deploy broadband services, continue maintenance, and enhance its services.
- 12 We find that a distribution in the amount of \$161,648 from the State USF Program is in the public interest, consistent with the purposes underlying the regulation and applicable statutes and should be granted.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- 13 (1) The Commission is an agency of the State of Washington vested by statute with the authority to regulate public service companies, including local exchange companies.
- 14 (2) Rainer Connect is a local exchange company as defined in WAC 480-120-021 and a public service company subject to Commission jurisdiction.
- 15 (3) Rainer Connect has certified it meets the FCC's total deployment obligations associated with federal high-cost support as of the date of the petition and that since January 1, 2018, it deployed broadband services to the number of locations required by the Commission's Adoption Order in Docket UT-190437.

- 16 (4) Rainer Connect has provided a broadband plan to maintain current services while continuing to deploy broadband service throughout their service area.
- 17 (5) Rainer Connect is eligible to receive funding from the State USF Program in the amount of \$161,648 to be disbursed no later than December 31, 2021.

ORDER

THE COMMISSION ORDERS:

- 18 (1) Mashell Telecom, Inc., d/b/a Rainier Connect or The Rainier Group's request for funds from the State USF Program for fiscal year ending June 30, 2022, in the amount of \$161,648 is granted.
- 19 (2) The funds will be disbursed by December 31, 2021.
- 20 (3) The Commission retains jurisdiction over this matter for purposes of effectuating this order.

DATED at Lacey, Washington and effective November 12, 2021.

WASHINGTON UTILITIES AND TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

DAVID W. DANNER, Chair

ANN E. RENDAHL, Commissioner

JAY M. BALASBAS, Commissioner