

NEWS FROM THE ULSTER COUNTY OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER

March S. Gallagher, Esq.
Comptroller



Charles Dinstuhl, CPA
Deputy Comptroller

For release: Immediately
Contact: Dafne DeJesus 845-331-8774

Ulster County Comptroller's Citizens Commission for Digital Inclusion Celebrates Three Year Anniversary and Milestones of Fiber in Phoenicia and Engineering for Broadband in Denning

Kingston, NY (May 6, 2025)- The Ulster County Comptroller's Citizens Commission for Digital Inclusion celebrates its third anniversary. County Comptroller March Gallagher convened the Commission in May 2022 to advance fair broadband access for all constituents, including those in remote regions. The Commission's focus was to maximize the County's access to federal and state investments under the Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program.

The Commission membership is drawn from a broad spectrum of County residents, including librarians, town officials, educators, and first responders. Jenny Lee, a sculptor, Professor at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and volunteer firefighter in Denning, led the efforts as Chair.

"I'm proud of the important work our dedicated members are doing to expand broadband access into all parts of the County," said **Commission Chair Jenny Lee**. "Our remote and challenging terrain makes this a difficult project, but it is an essential one — the internet has become a basic part of life affecting employment, education, and social interactions. It's great that Comptroller Gallagher got the ball rolling; the strategic and administrative support from the Comptroller and Executive has been invaluable."

Since its formation, the Commission has vigorously pursued efforts to expand broadband access countywide including holding multiple in-person and virtual broadband town halls; mapping broadband access in the County; challenging both the Federal Communications Commission and New York State broadband maps, identifying dozens of community anchor institutions; engaging with the NYS ConnectALL program; and collaborating with regional partners such as the Southeastern New York Library Resources Council, Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress, Communication Workers of America, and internet service providers.

The Commission's efforts have achieved results such as encouraging Margaretville Telephone Company's (MTC) to run fiber optics through the hamlet of Phoenicia in the Town of Shandaken. "The impact of this Commission's work has been felt by everyone in Phoenicia," said **Phoenicia Library Director and Commission Member Liz Potter**. "Not only has MTC offered businesses and

residences in parts of the hamlet high speed fiber optic, they have given the community free WiFi along most of Main Street. For a town that doesn't have cell service, having fast, free WiFi for all is not only a convenience, it's essential to make calls. It's great for visitors who are caught unaware that we don't have cellular and need to make a call or get directions off the Internet."

Another major achievement was the Commission's assistance in securing a Technical Assistance grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development to help MTC plan and engineer expansion of fiber to 124 unserved locations in the Town of Denning.

"Thanks to the dedication and support of the Ulster County Citizens Commission, Margaretville Telephone Company has secured a \$145,000 USDA Rural Development grant to fund pre-construction and engineering for a vital fiber broadband project, said **NYS Senator Peter Oberacker**. "This investment is a critical step toward bringing high-speed internet to the residents of Denning, delivering the connectivity our community needs and deserves."

The Commission also partnered with Ulster Literacy and The OpenHub Project to apply for funding through the New York State Digital Equity Program Capacity program to expand digital literacy and adoption of digital devices.

"For three years, the Ulster County Citizens Commission for Digital Inclusion has worked tirelessly to expand broadband access and digital equity across our most rural communities," noted **County Executive Jen Metzger**. "Digital access is no longer a luxury — it's a necessity for education, work, healthcare, and staying connected. I want to recognize Comptroller March Gallagher for convening this Commission, the indefatigable leadership of Commission Chair Jenny Lee, and the many stakeholders who participated. Thanks to their hard work, we've seen tangible results in the Phoenicia and Denning communities. Ulster County remains committed to bridging the digital divide, and I look forward to supporting the Commission as they push for fair, equitable, and universal access to high-speed internet."

"I am so thankful to the volunteer members of the Commission for their time and attention to ensure that the digital needs of Ulster County residents are identified and met," said **County Comptroller March Gallagher**. "With federal and state funds teed up to expand fiber broadband, I want to make sure that Ulster County closes our digital gaps and with this team in place, I believe we are well positioned to do just that.

###

List of Commission Members attached

Image of Ulster County Broadband Map attached