**Inside The Movement To Improve Access To High-Speed Internet In Rural Areas**

Broadband Internet is a fact of life for most Americans. But 21 million people do not have access to high-speed connections at all. In rural areas, there's a move to improve the situation.

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

It's time now for All Tech Considered.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CORNISH: Like clean water or electricity, the Internet is now a must in most people's lives, but the federal government says more than 21 million people can't get broadband. Many of them live in rural areas. Now, if they had Internet access, it might slow the brain drain, spur innovation in farming and breathe new life into local economies.

Paul Flahive of Texas Public Radio visited one rural community that's turned to an old playbook to connect the disconnected.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Electricity - about time we got it around here.

PAUL FLAHIVE, BYLINE: The same reasons advocates use to promote broadband today were used 80 years ago to power rural America. This film, funded by the Rural Electrification Administration, shows some of the same obstacles exist.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: But the power company says you can see their lines go cross-country, see them in the sky. But they don't bring the power down to the farm - say it costs too much, say a lot of things.

FLAHIVE: Federal loan dollars helped create these rural electrical cooperatives to reach millions of homes with electricity. Now these same co-ops are taking on broadband in small towns across Texas.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE: (Chanting) Let's go, bulldogs. Let's go. Let's go, bulldogs. Let's go.

FLAHIVE: In downtown Bandera, a homecoming parade crosses Main Street. Students cheer and throw candy to kids lining the route.

JERRY HOLLINGSWORTH: We offer a small-town flavor of life that you can't get in generic suburbs.

FLAHIVE: Jerry Hollingsworth is superintendent of the school district. Bandera calls itself the cowboy capital of the world, hosting shootouts and reenactments most Saturday afternoons. A horse-crossing sign greets people on the highway entering the town from the rolling Texas Hill Country - hills filled with turkey and deer, but not a lot of people. The nearest big city is San Antonio, an hour east. Hollingsworth says some students travel 50 miles to school in a district that spans hundreds of square miles. Given its sparse population, Hollingsworth says students often don't have Internet at home.

HOLLINGSWORTH: We're basically saying to an entire group of kids, an entire group of families that you're not as important as somebody who's living in a suburb where it's easily accessible.

FLAHIVE: But that is changing.

(SOUNDBITE OF DRILL)

FLAHIVE: On a quiet country road, contractors for Bandera Electric Cooperative, like Jonathan Leyva, hang steel lashing wire from one of their poles. Eventually, it will carry high-speed Internet to the county.

JONATHAN LEYVA: Give me the end of that strand, and I'll put it up there real quick.

FLAHIVE: Crews like this have hung a thousand miles of fiber-optic cable. Bandera CEO Bill Hetherington plans to offer broadband to most of its 30,000 members in three years.

BILL HETHERINGTON: It's not about making money. You're not doing this to make money. You're doing this to allow your communities to survive and to be here 20 years from now.

FLAHIVE: Hetherington says broadband service is important to the co-op's future. Without it, businesses and people may not move here. He says the town's economic growth has hit double digits since they began to offer the high-speed Internet. Other Texas electrical co-ops are paying attention.

HETHERINGTON: A lot of co-ops come to us and say - to give us the secret sauce.

FLAHIVE: There's limited federal money for these projects, and it may not work everywhere. But rural co-ops already own the power lines and poles to homes and may well be the key to granting broadband access to millions of rural Americans.

For NPR News, I'm Paul Flahive in Bandera, Texas.