

Bluewell water project gets \$2.5M boost from POWER program

- [By CHARLIE BOOTHE Bluefield Daily Telegraph](#)
- Aug 25, 2016

BLUEWELL — A proposed \$3.57 million water line project from the Bluewell Public Service District to Mercer County Airport is on its way to reality.

As part of the federal POWER Initiative grant program, funding for the project was part of a round of approvals announced Wednesday.

The Bluewell Public Service District will receive \$1.5 million from the Appalachian Regional Commission and \$1 million from the U.S. Economic Development Administration to expand municipal water service to the Mercer County Airport.

“This announcement is critical for southern West Virginia’s economic growth,” said Rep. Evan Jenkins, who was instrumental in supporting the grant application. “Expanding city water service out to the Mercer County Airport will allow us to fully develop the airport and its surrounding land, creating exciting new opportunities for Bluefield and the surrounding counties.”

These grants will allow the Bluewell PSD to expand public water service to the Mercer County Regional Airport and along Route 52 and Airport Road. It is expected to create 38 new jobs and expand economic development opportunities at the airport and along the roads.

As a member of the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Jenkins helped secure \$50 million for the ARC to invest in Appalachia, as well as \$15 million for the EDA to help coal communities hurt by the downturn in coal.

“The Mercer County Commission is excited to announce the availability of funds for Airport Road/Route 52 water upgrade and extension,” said county Commissioner Greg Puckett. “Through the collaborative efforts of the Bluewell PSD, Region One Planning and Development Council, and the commission, over \$3.5 million dollars will be available to increase the availability of water services to 65 additional residential customers, and ten businesses. It will increase water system pressure and increase fire protection as well.”

Puckett said design will begin immediately, and construction is estimated to begin in late 2018 to be completed in 2019.

“This funding will allow for the Mercer County Airport to have a reliable water source and provide fire suppression that will allow them to expand the runway for larger aircraft and recruitment of additional businesses and property development,” Puckett said. “That development plan will be completed on the 200-plus acres that adjoin the airport.”

The award was one of 29 made as a part of the Obama Administration's Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) Initiative to stimulate economic growth and opportunity in communities that have historically relied on the coal economy for economic stability. With this announcement, communities and regions that have been negatively affected by changes in the coal economy are able to strengthen their economies and workforces.

Two other grants impacting the region were also part of this round of approvals from the program.

A \$1.4 million ARC grant was approved for Southwest Virginia Community College (SWCC) in Cedar Bluff, Va. for the Retraining Energy Displaced Individuals (REDI) Center for Dislocated Coal Miners program.

The REDI program will provide fast-track reemployment services directly to displaced coal miners, equipping them with the necessary skills to get back to work in a high-demand field, earning comparable wages to their previous employment.

Through an intensive, accelerated program of coursework, workers can obtain credentialed skills in as little as four months, rather than the more traditional training periods of a year or more.

Training will be focused on three sectors with local employment opportunities: advanced manufacturing, construction, and health technology. The program will certify 165 new trainees over the life of the award, and will be supported by funding from the Thompson Charitable Fund and the Virginia Tobacco Commission.

An ARC grant of \$1.4 million was approved for the Hatfield McCoy Regional Recreation Authority in Man, W.Va. for the Southern Coalfields Sustainable Tourism & Entrepreneurship Program.

The funds will develop and implement a comprehensive program to expand tourism-related employment and businesses in southern West Virginia, and will foster Hatfield McCoy Trail expansion in Kentucky and Virginia.

The award provides for the deployment of a coordinated marketing effort, which will increase the region-wide economic impact of the Trails by \$13 million per year.

The project will create 225 jobs and 50 new businesses along the Trails, and will be supported by funding from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation.

The City of Bluefield has applied for a \$2.4 million grant through the program to enhance the Commercialization Center, a business incubator initiative in Bluefield.

Jim Spencer, Bluefield's director of economic development, said the grant application has been fully submitted and is still be vetted but is not yet ready to be eligible for approval.

“This was only the first round of approvals,” he said. “More will come.”

— Contact Charles Boothe at cboothe@bdtonline.com