Frequently Asked Questions

What is the [Sewanee Fiber Project](#)?
Ben Lomand Connect, the University of the South, and
Duck River Electric Membership Corporation (DREMC)
in partnership will deliver a fiber-to-the-premises
solution that improves DREMC's electrical infrastructure to leaseholders and expands Ben
Lomand's fiber services to leaseholders on the University of the South's Domain.

Specifically the infrastructure project:

- improves DREMC's ability to support new technologies in homes (for example, voluntary demand response programs, in which a DREMC member volunteers to reduce electricity use during periods of high demand, reducing the need to run high-cost generators).
- enhances DREMC's overall efficiencies to minimize the impact of power outages and improve response time when outages happen.
- expands options available to leaseholders for phone, high-speed internet, security/home automation, video services, and cable services, and includes among those options a nonprofit/member-owned provider.
- improves leaseholder access to high-speed internet.

Important to note: **The fiber to Sewanee project has NO impact on the University's need for a cell tower.** There are many forms of connectivity. Our community needs both—improved fiber connectivity and improved cellular service.

What has been the process, communications, and community's engagement in making this decision?
- On September 6, 2019, the *Sewanee Mountain Messenger* published a formal notice regarding an information session on the Sewanee Fiber Project with DREMC, the University, and Ben Lomand, and noted that the topic would be on the Community Council agenda for the September meeting.
- On September 6, 2019, leaseholders were sent a notice via email about both the upcoming Community Council meeting and the upcoming town hall.
- On September 9, 2019, the Sewanee Fiber Project was presented to the Community Council for their engagement and counsel. Community Council agreed that the project was an important infrastructure project and discussed possible methods of equitably sharing costs with the community.
- On September 12, 2019, the University hosted a town hall along with Ben Lomand Connect and DREMC on the potential project, describing the expected benefits and fielding questions related to the project. About 40 community members attended.
- On September 13, 2019, a *Messenger* article covered "Fiber Optic Service for Every House Proposed." The story reported on the Council meeting and the discussion of various ways of calculating assessments. As reported by the *Messenger*, the possibilities included a flat assessment and assessments in proportion to property values.

- On September 20, 2019, a *Messenger* article reported on the town hall meeting in "Fiber to the Premises Across the Domain." This article gave more detail about the project and again explained the possibility of an assessment to leaseholders. At the time, as reported, no decision had been made about how the cost would be shared or over what period of time.
- On October 9, 2019, the Trustee Community Relations Committee along with members of the Community Council received an update on the fiber plans and had the opportunity to ask questions of the University.
- On October 24, 2019, the University signed an agreement with Ben Lomand and DREMC to bring fiber to leaseholds on the Domain.
- On January 13, 2020, the University communicated that it could not assess a higher portion of the cost to non-residents; the lease agreement says that municipal fees will be assessed based on the assessed value of improvements.
- On January 17, 2020, the *Messenger* published an article on the Community Council's discussion, "Council Considers Concerns About Fiber Optic Cost."

What are the financial arrangements?

The total cost of the project is $1,450,000. Ben Lomand and DREMC together are paying half the cost of the infrastructure improvements, with DREMC paying the majority of that portion for fiber infrastructure and Ben Lomand Connect handling costs associated with fiber electronics and customer premise equipment on a current and ongoing basis. The University is paying $725,000 (the other half) and will recoup $130,500 of that expense from leaseholders using its usual method of assessing municipal-type fees. The cost increase to leaseholders for the fiber infrastructure will be spread out over 10 years.

Expense

Leaseholders
9.0%

University
41.0%

Ben Lomand/DREMC
50.0%
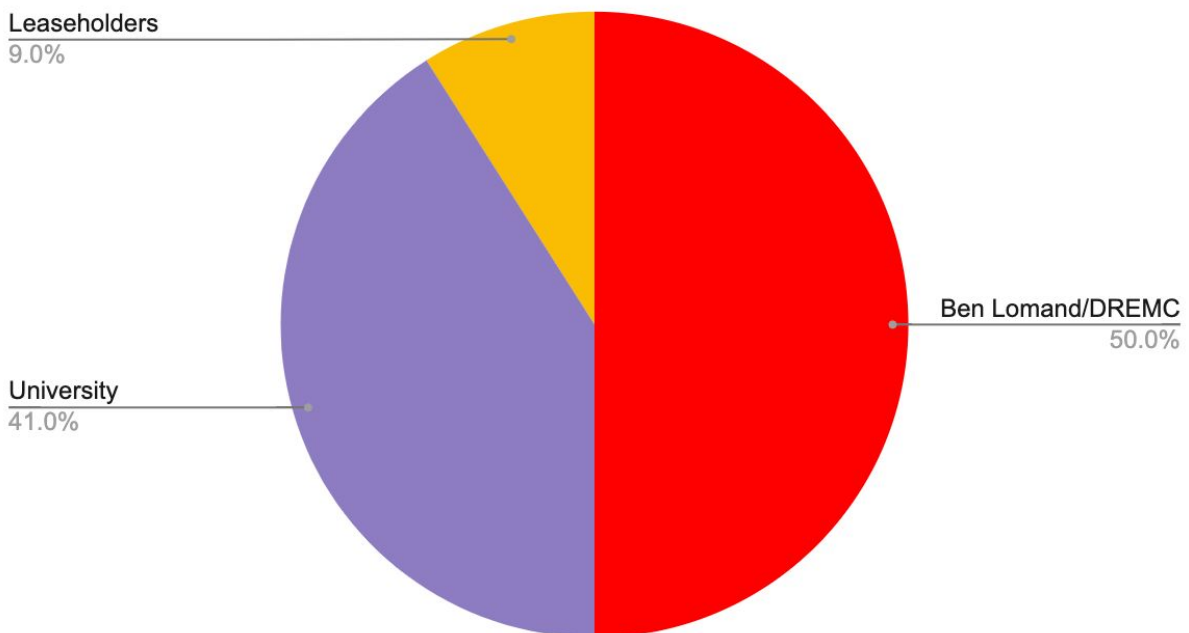
What decision has already been made?
The infrastructure agreement is signed and the work is underway with a completion date anticipated by Fall 2020 for all three phases of the project.

Who made the decision to assess leaseholders?
The University makes decisions related to leaseholder fees in consultation with the Community Council. Decisions are influenced by many but ultimately made by the Vice-Chancellor.

Were leaseholders polled about paying for the service?
The University's approach to setting municipal fees and improving infrastructure is to seek advice from the Community Council, the community's elected representatives. This decision is consistent with that practice. The University does not typically poll leaseholders.

Why will leaseholders be assessed for a service they do not intend to use?
Infrastructure is a cost spread out among leaseholders. The University's objective is to provide an effective and modern infrastructure to leaseholds to ensure that community members have basic services available to them. Those services will now include: police, fire, and ambulance services, trash and recycling pickup, phone, video services, security/home automation and high-speed internet.

Do we have any statistics that tell us how many people will benefit from this new service?
Leaseholds do not currently have access to the same quality high-speed connectivity that is being installed. Some providers will make comparable claims, but the actual quality of connectivity is either less or significantly less than what is being installed.

No leaseholds currently have a fiber infrastructure to support the system DREMC is installing.

We have clusters of leaseholds that do not have access to high-speed internet or cable. We do not have an exact number, only frequent reports of no coverage, poor coverage, uneven service, and poor response to customers by existing providers.

How much will leaseholders actually have to pay for the infrastructure? What is the specific figure being discussed?
Leaseholders pay different amounts based on the appraised value of the improvement (building, home) as determined by Franklin County tax assessor. The full range of increase per year would vary from $1 to $25. Again, the total is at most $25 per year for ten years. The majority of leaseholders would pay between $2 and $10 a year.

Is this cost effective? Were competing bids solicited?
The University initially engaged a technology and infrastructure consultant to help us motivate existing providers to improve their fiber connectivity, specifically AT&T and Spectrum. Neither were responsive to our inquiries. Ben Lomand was responsive and, in partnership with DREMC, submitted a proposal.

Why is this item being treated differently from other individual lease improvements?
The University has treated this as an infrastructure project in process, in communications, and in funding. It is slightly different in that some leaseholders already have satisfactory service. However, many leaseholders do not and those individuals have not been able to improve their situation without a collective effort. Lastly, this project is different because it aims to improve the infrastructure in anticipation of future needs, making these improvements available to the entire community in expectation that demand for connectivity will increase.

Why are leaseholders the only community members that did not receive a grant and will be paying for infrastructure?
The University Domain and contiguous areas were reviewed for grant funding possibilities. Given current guidelines, this specific area is not eligible.

Is the University willing to revisit their contribution to the project, as it considers the needs of the entire community?
We frequently reflect on our practices in hope to find ways to strengthen the existing Sewanee community and make it a more desirable place to learn, to work, and to live.

Some of this information is available at https://www.fiberforsewanee.com/.