

# Fiber for Fairlawn

Fairlawn, Ohio, built an FTTH network for economic development. Now it's joining forces with the Medina County Fiber Network to expand its reach and become more financially viable.

By Lisa Gonzalez / *Institute for Local Self-Reliance*

**I**n 2015, community leaders in Fairlawn, a town of 7,500 people in northeastern Ohio, announced they would take the necessary steps to bring high-quality internet access to the community. At the time, a typical connection in Fairlawn measured around 15 Mbps download and 1 Mbps upload. According to Ernie Staten, deputy director of the Fairlawn Public Service Department, community leaders knew they needed fast, affordable, reliable connectivity if the Akron suburb were to remain competitive.

Fairlawn's business community felt the pain of poor connectivity most. On a typical workday, the population increases to 40,000, and cable and DSL networks couldn't handle the demand. Nor were ISPs willing to make investments to solve the problem. Other communities in the Akron-Fairlawn-Bath Joint Economic Development District (JEDD) dealt with the same issue.

Rather than wait for improved services, the city began to look into publicly owned options. A consultant hired to perform a feasibility study and recommend a business model envisioned a public-private partnership, and at first, city leaders expected to pursue that model. Within a few months, however, both the city and the public sector partner it had selected decided it was in the best interest of Fairlawn for the city to run the network. It decided to pursue a publicly owned and operated FTTH network for households and businesses, along with a fixed wireless complement for public spaces.

Community leaders planned to expand the network, FairlawnGig, beyond the city and across the JEDD to improve connectivity throughout the region. The expansion plan would allow the network to grow, helping to ensure its financial viability.

To fund the \$10 million project, Fairlawn decided to use revenue bonds. It established symmetrical gigabit connectivity for residential subscribers at \$75 per month. (Residential telephone service is available for \$25 per month per line.) Rates can increase only with the approval of the city council.

## BUSINESS CONNECTIONS

In mid-2016, before the network began offering service, Staten and his team accelerated the deployment schedule so they could connect two Fairlawn hotels in time for the Republican National Convention. Because the event was scheduled to occur in Cleveland, about 30 minutes north, and attendees needed lodging with high-quality internet access, FairlawnGig connected two Hiltons filled with RNC delegates. By the end of the year, the network was connecting businesses throughout the community. Commercial subscribers praised FairlawnGig's speed and reliability.

Even though the project is relatively young, economic development returns are already stacking up. Eighteen new businesses have transferred to the city and credited the network as the main attraction. Staten says most are small businesses, such as law firms, engineering

firms and IT firms. Because they employ high-paid, highly skilled personnel, they add significantly to the city's tax rolls. Other establishments that were already in Fairlawn report that their businesses are growing because they now have the connectivity they need to expand.

### A BOON TO RESIDENTS

After bringing the city's business connectivity options up to speed, Staten and other city leaders turned their efforts to serving residents. In early 2017, demand for better residential internet access was already high. In the neighborhood where the first installations are taking place, 80 percent of households committed to installation. By the end of 2017, the city finished deployment and connected 1,500 premises. By April 2018, almost 50 percent of premises in Fairlawn were connected to the network; officials had banked on a 35 percent penetration rate to break even.

For property owners who consider the investment value of the fiber network, residential connection is a boon to their homes. Property values have risen in part due to the availability of the network, which makes Fairlawn a more desirable place for families and businesses.

Mike Perkins' family used to pay \$80 per month for 30 Mbps download and much slower upload speeds; now they're on FairlawnGig. "Everybody is happy," Perkins says. "I haven't heard my son once say, 'Dad, the internet is slow,' and I used to hear that all the time."

### FIXED WIRELESS FOR PUBLIC SPACES

After completing the FTTH deployment, the city turned its attention to the fixed wireless complement, which is intended to blanket the entire city. Staten and others felt that offering fixed wireless on FairlawnGig would allow the city's many daily visitors to avoid using their mobile data plans.

FairlawnGig intends to provide three wireless options:

## Eighteen new businesses have moved to Fairlawn, in large part because of the FTTP network, and other businesses say fiber connectivity is allowing them to expand.

- A traditional free guest network like those many commercial establishments offer
- A 100 percent secure, fee-based plan that provides 30/30 Mbps service for about \$10 per month, available on a month-by-month basis for use with mobile devices
- An option for FTTH subscribers or business subscribers that would also offer 100 percent secure, 30/30 Mbps service for no extra charge. Subscribers would access the service with a special password.

Fairlawn is still working on obtaining access to poles and hammering out details but hopes to have the fixed wireless network functioning all across the city by 2019.

### A REGIONAL NETWORK

Now that the city has the connectivity it longed for when it started the process, FairlawnGig is expanding to serve the other communities of the JEDD.

In June 2018, the city of Fairlawn and the Medina County Fiber Network (MCFN) announced they would collaborate to expand FairlawnGig via the MCFN infrastructure. MCFN, a publicly owned, open-access fiber network, has served the region for about six years. The dark fiber was a project of the Medina County Port Authority and first connected Highland schools in 2012. The collaboration will boost connectivity in the region for residents and provide even more competitive options for businesses in Akron and other JEDD communities.

By leasing capacity on the MCFN, FairlawnGig can expand in an east-west direction to balance the existing north-south route. Akron businesses have already contacted FairlawnGig

offices, seeking more information about subscribing.

Businesses in Akron have access to connectivity from incumbents Spectrum and AT&T, but services are limited and expensive. A limited number of other ISPs offer business connectivity via the MCFN. FairlawnGig will be the first ISP on the MCFN to offer connections of up to 10 Gbps to business subscribers.

According to Staten, FairlawnGig is beginning slowly with internet access and telephone services but hopes to offer additional services to businesses in the future. In keeping with FairlawnGig's aim to provide high-quality customer service for local subscribers, Staten believes that businesses will also find value in the personal service and accountability of a publicly owned ISP. Residents in the more rural areas west of Akron have already contacted FairlawnGig offices to learn more about service from the municipal network.

When Fairlawn decided to invest in fiber infrastructure to bring high-quality internet access to the community, it moved quickly and saw positive results rapidly. Businesses and residents in Fairlawn were ready for a municipal network and the benefits it promised and delivered. With local success fueling FairlawnGig's momentum, a need in the neighboring communities, and room for growth to serve the Cleveland suburb's environs, the future looks favorable for FairlawnGig. ❖

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