

Making Broadband Work

The federal government can do more to increase broadband investment and adoption.

By Heather Burnett Gold / FTTH Council Americas

In January, President Obama traveled to Cedar Falls, Iowa, to deliver a message: He intends his administration to be a catalyst in delivering “broadband that works.” This was the next step in furthering his commitment to “help[ing] folks build the fastest networks so the next generation of digital innovators and entrepreneurs have the platform to keep reshaping our world.” The president chose Cedar Falls – a fiber-to-the-home community – as an example of a place where broadband “works.”

Making good on his promise, the president set up a multiagency council – the Broadband Opportunity Council (BOC) – to increase broadband investment and adoption. The BOC’s charge: come up with steps its 25 agencies can take to advance those goals. The president asked for regulatory actions or budget proposals within 150 days.

The BOC sought comments from industry and other stakeholders, and the FTTH Council was pleased to share its recommendations. Council comments were guided by the belief that to get better broadband everywhere, the federal government must promote comprehensive strategies to lower regulatory barriers and facilitate all-fiber network builds.

A pressing concern is that providers and communities have no single, easy-to-use source of information on how to access federal funds, obtain necessary permits and adopt successful strategies to deploy broadband infrastructure. This administration has made notable progress in investigating ways to streamline the federal permitting and review process, but it has been two years since a federal entity last issued a progress report. In addition, little comprehensive information exists in one place about how to plan a deployment.

Providers spend a lot of time and resources to get basic information about project development. This means some potential deployments are delayed or abandoned because the planning process is prohibitively expensive. To remedy this problem, the FTTH Council recommended (1) an online broadband deployment handbook and (2) an interagency broadband deployment consulting service.

A one-stop shop for prospective broadband projects should include the following:

- **A road map for accessing federal funding.** The handbook should include an easy-to-use road map of all federal resources available for funding a broadband infrastructure deployment, from developing feasibility plans through constructing a network. The FTTH Council

developed a similar guide as part of its Community Toolkit, which provides communities with information about federal funding that can be used to deploy all-fiber networks. But in developing its guide, the council faced significant challenges in trying to compile the information and ensure that it was complete and up-to-date.

- **Clear permitting instructions.** The handbook should have clear instructions to guide providers and communities through the permitting process for access to federal assets, such as poles, ducts, conduits and other rights of way.
- **A more complete broadband map.** The handbook should include a more complete national broadband map that providers and communities can use when applying for funding or permits. This map should indicate underserved and unserved areas and highlight other federal assets that providers can use to expedite deployment, such as highway conduit and federal buildings.
- **Best practices for communities.** The handbook should include best practices that communities can leverage to improve the business case for all-fiber deployments. For example, Google developed a checklist to help communities gather information about existing infrastructure, assist providers with gaining access to rights of way, and facilitate permitting, construction and maintenance processes. And the FTTH Council Community Toolkit provides strategies for communities to make themselves fiber ready.

An online, one-stop shop would help overcome barriers to information. For instances in which more specific information is needed, the FTTH Council recommended the executive branch establish an interagency consultancy to assist communities and providers – particularly small entities – in understanding the federal permitting process and available federal funding sources for broadband infrastructure deployments. The council looks forward to the Broadband Opportunity Council’s report, expected in August, and to continuing to collaborate on these efforts. ❖

Heather Burnett Gold is president and CEO of the Fiber to the Home Council Americas, a nonprofit association whose mission is to accelerate deployment of all-fiber access networks. You can contact her at heather.b.gold@ftthcouncil.org.