

Six Ways Communities Can Help Providers Build Networks

Service providers and communities should look for common ground with public infrastructure and investments to spur rural broadband buildouts.

By Trevor Jones / OTELCO

Public-private partnerships are critical to advancing broadband deployment in rural markets. These partnerships take many forms, with each party bringing unique assets and skills to the table. When considering how your community might attract investment from an ISP, consider all the assets you bring to the table, not just the almighty dollar.

Here are six ways your community can help a potential ISP partner realize a return on investing in your community.

- **Information:** Twenty years ago, your incumbent LEC knew where 95 percent of residents lived and how to reach them, because the market penetration of landline service was that high. These days, incumbents may not have access to customer names and addresses and may not fully understand where population growth is occurring. Municipal governments know who owns property in your town and can help your service provider get in touch with potential customers. If you're uncomfortable sharing the addresses, you can consider alternative approaches to leverage your knowledge (see "Marketing assistance and take rate" at right).
- **Permitting and rights of way:** Constructing new utilities can require setting new poles or trenching for new conduit. These activities require access to the public right of way and may require environmental and other permits. Your town can help by implementing provider-friendly local permitting policies, and by advocating for prospective providers at the state and federal levels when necessary.
- **Provider-friendly comprehensive plans:** Often, communities focused on beautification of their downtown districts make the decision to suppress utilities. Buried cables in built-up areas can significantly increase the cost of network deployment. You can address this by shifting the utility rights of way to the backs of buildings (side streets), rather than burying them. This allows for beautification of Main Street while maintaining access to a pole line for providers. Another alternative is for your town to construct a conduit system during road and sidewalk construction, then lease portions of that system to ISPs.
- **Forecasting growth:** Because your planning department is involved in permitting new homes and subdivisions, you have an idea of where your population is heading in terms

of growth, and where that growth is likely to take place. This information helps service providers learn about and plan for future growth opportunities in your town, saving money over the long run.

- **Marketing assistance and take rate:** Your community communicates with its residents on a regular basis. It sends tax bills a couple of times each year, and you may have email lists, newsletters or community Facebook groups to share information. Because reaching a high take rate is an important component of achieving a return on investment, and access to contact information is an important part of getting that take rate, your community can use these assets to share the news about your provider's offerings. Your community could also run a "presubscription drive" to collect a list of people willing to sign up for a new service, along with permission for your ISP to contact them.
- **Matching investment:** This is the most obvious but most powerful contribution. In some cases, a provider may need a direct, matching public investment to generate a return, especially in the most rural parts of your community. A direct community investment will go a long way toward making better broadband a reality. If your community lacks support for that, it still can assist your provider in attracting state or federal funds by building community support for a grant application. Recently, OTELCO worked with the town of Alton, Maine, to build a town-wide fiber-to-the-home network using a combination of private, local and state funds. The community's direct investment turned out to be the smallest of the three, but its effort to generate 80-plus percent public support for the project was essential to obtaining state funds.

The bottom line is that if your community isn't ready to take the plunge on building its own network, there is still a lot it can do to help constituents get better broadband access. Picking just two or three items from the list above could make a significant difference. ❖

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