

# Connecting the Hoosier Heartland For Economic Development

Intelligent Fiber Network helps rural Indiana communities grow their economies and connect national and international businesses with high-speed fiber services.

By Cory Childs / *Intelligent Fiber Network (IFN)*

**T**he world cannot operate today without the internet, which is as true in Indiana's urban centers as it is on its farms. Sustainable broadband is paramount for business competitiveness and economic growth, and the lines between urban and rural and their advantages and disadvantages are blurring. Indianapolis and parts of Indiana have been referred to as the Silicon Prairie, and whether people agree with that moniker or not, technology hubs are no longer just on the West Coast – or just in cities, for that matter. Rural areas, especially in the Hoosier State, are eager to grow local economies and connect with national and international businesses.

Intelligent Fiber Network (IFN), a middle-mile network in Indiana owned by 21 independent local telcos, is building relationships with local economic development corporations (EDCs) across the state to help close the digital divide and set businesses up for long-term success. When growth is the goal, businesses and their technology partners must have a similar vision: forward and up. IFN's partnerships with EDCs, local governments and even cell tower providers have played an enormous role in Indiana's economic growth.

## CONNECTING WHITLEY COUNTY BUSINESSES

In 2018, IFN and the Whitley County Commissioners launched an economic

development initiative to make high-speed fiber networking available for businesses at a reduced cost. Extending from the U.S. Highway 30 corridor, the county and its small towns are now certified as Broadband Ready Communities by the Indiana Economic Development Corporation. The county's population is less than 34,000, but its broadband connectivity allows its resident businesses to operate and compete on a global scale.

One such business is Reelcraft, a global manufacturer of hose, cord and cable reels for industrial, commercial and professional applications. Headquartered in Columbia City, Indiana (population less than 9,200), the company has a satellite office in the United Kingdom and an additional manufacturing facility in China. Its operations and communications span the globe, which is why fast, reliable service is vital to the company. Through IFN's partnership with Whitley County, Reelcraft can rely on the cloud for its VoIP phone and call center using a 100 Mbps asynchronous fiber circuit.

Another company with a facility in Columbia City is Iotron, which processes electron beams. The company is headquartered in British Columbia, and when its Indiana facility moved its paper-based processes to the cloud, it needed reliable service to avoid bottlenecks. Like Reelcraft, Iotron was able to connect to IFN's secure network thanks to



In 2019, IFN completed the installation of a new Liberty Cabinet that replaced an existing IFN cabinet. Robinson Construction provided the heavy lifting.

its partnership with and expansion in Whitley County to reduce outages and work more seamlessly.

### MEETING STATEWIDE NEEDS

It's not just a single county that needs reliable connectivity in Indiana. Among the state's 92 counties, 23 are considered "nonmetropolitan noncore," meaning they do not have a city, a town or an urban cluster with 10,000 or more residents. Across these 92 counties, the state government has more than 700 interconnected remote offices – more than Apple and Microsoft retail stores combined. Before the state can connect with its international business partners in cities such as Tokyo, it must ensure its connections with its own communities, such as Tipton (population 5,104).

Some Indiana government offices in large communities have access to big-name carrier networks, but IFN and its independent member/owners have network availability in small, medium and large communities across the state. Through IFN, state offices were able to link with local carriers, and IFN provided backhaul traffic to Indianapolis.

Using these services, the state interconnected each of its locations on an "E-Tree" fiber network, which provides point-to-multipoint connectivity for "root" sites and up to 20 "leaf" sites. In Indiana's case, the main data center in Indianapolis served as a root site that amassed all the traffic

from leaf sites and connected them to the main government center. The ability to partner with small independent carriers while also providing service in major carrier markets offers a deeper level of flexibility for small or scaling companies and communities to meet diverse economic needs no matter where they are.

### ENABLING RURAL WIRELESS AND FIBER BROADBAND

Of course, it's not just businesses that need to connect. As the "Crossroads of America," Indiana's interstates are traversed by millions of people annually. Driving through rural corn and soy fields is inevitable, and travelers must rightly assume that their connectivity is uninterrupted. Often cell towers provide connections in rural areas of the state.

IFN and several of its member/owners have been able to expand and connect their fiber networks to new cellular towers national carriers are installing throughout the state. As a single entity source in a location, IFN is an ideal partner for cell carriers, but rural communities benefit the most. When rural telecommunications companies or rural electric membership cooperatives win cell tower bids and participate in fiber builds, they have the benefit of being able to offer fiber to the home (FTTH) or fiber to the business to customers along the way. For example, IFN member/owner NineStar Connect has connected more than 350 residences

through more than 16 miles of fiber to cell towers across central Indiana, delivering urban-grade, high-speed fiber to rural homes. Several upcoming cell tower projects are on the horizon, and more FTTH is likely to follow.

IFN continues to expand its fiber network and its community partnerships, both urban and rural alike. IFN recently connected with ValpoNet in Valparaiso, Indiana, which supplies IFN's last mile of fiber optic network connectivity. This partnership allows Valparaiso to remain competitive in business recruitment and retention, not just in Indiana but also across the United States. IFN is pursuing new and expanded partnerships in other similar-sized communities, including Richmond and Anderson.

Every community must be connected to succeed today – it must interconnect with nearby communities, those from coast to coast, or communities around the globe. A company cannot be competitive if it can't instantaneously reach a global audience when needed. IFN has been able to partner with and make lasting impacts on communities of all sizes in Indiana to ensure this remains true. Every local connection helps fuel local economies, which in turn fuel the state and the nation. ❖

*Cory Childs is vice president of sales, marketing and business development of Intelligent Fiber Network.*