

Ellensburg, Washington, Taps Consolidated to Elevate Its Broadband Status

Consolidated Communications has entered a public-private partnership to transition the city's copper-based DSL residential and business customers to a new, fiber-based network.

By Sean Buckley / *Broadband Communities*

Like many communities around the country, a few years ago Ellensburg, Washington, decided it needed to do something to improve its broadband situation.

In its 2018 strategic plan, the city's economic development agency, CenterFuse, identified what it said was a lack of consistent, high-speed broadband – a weakness in sustaining and recruiting businesses.

“Every time someone came to town when we were doing business recruitment, they always asked, how is your broadband?” says CenterFuse executive director

Margaret Reich. That spurred the CenterFuse board into action. The agency applied for and secured a \$50,000 grant from the Washington State Department of Commerce Public Works Board for a broadband planning feasibility study, which it hired a consultant to conduct.

Following an RFP process, CenterFuse selected Finley Engineering and CCG Consulting (CCG) to conduct the analysis, which was completed in December 2020.

That year, COVID-19 amplified Ellensburg's need for better broadband. “The issue of

broadband was elevated substantially then because people worked from home and kids went to school online,” Reich said.

OVERCOMING BROADBAND CHALLENGES

In its 2020 broadband study, CenterFuse highlighted broadband challenges in Ellensburg centered around four main elements: speed, reliability, access and security. The study found a disparity in available broadband in the city. Though broadband capacity was “robust” in some parts of the city, such as downtown, residential service was “subpar,” and broadband options were poor outside the city limits.

The study also highlighted how the lack of reliable broadband affected local businesses. To maintain uptime, local companies purchased two or three services.

“Business vitality requires strong internet service both to businesses and residents [because] employees and workers expect home internet to be as good as it is at work,” the study said. “The pandemic has perhaps changed the expectation of employers and employees for the frequency and desirability of working from home.”

It found that 33 percent of home internet connections are too slow or unreliable for people to attend work or school from home. Residents who lived outside the city could not connect to their work remotely. What's more, those



Margaret Reich



Ellensburg, Washington, about 90 minutes from Seattle, is experiencing rapid growth and will benefit from a new, high-speed fiber broadband network.

who could connect found connections were slow.

Though high-speed broadband was present in the center of Ellensburg's downtown core, old buildings were not connected to it, so offices and residents did not benefit.

From an access point of view, the study found two things: 15 percent of residents had no home broadband connection, and 35 percent of residents were still using DSL, "so their upload and download speeds were prolonged," Reich says.

The study recommended that Ellensburg collaborate with broadband providers to expand and improve the quality of available internet service. Ellensburg found its knight in shining armor in Consolidated Communications, an incumbent telco

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS ENHANCE CONSOLIDATED'S FIBER BUILD PLANS

Consolidated Communications continues to establish public-private partnerships with various communities within its wireline footprint, including towns and cities in New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont, Washington and other states.

For example, in May, Consolidated struck an agreement with Southern Vermont Communication Union District (CUD), which represents 14 rural towns in Bennington County. CUD advocates for bringing high-speed internet to the hard-to-connect region and has secured state funding for broadband projects.



Bob Udell

Bob Udell, CEO of Consolidated, told investors during the telco's second-quarter earnings call that it sees new opportunities in 2023 for up to \$100 million in broadband partnership and grant-funding

projects to deliver fiber-based services across a few states where it operates today.

"We're actively pursuing all opportunities that align with our build plan and help offset rural, high-cost castings, allowing a return consistent with our model," he said. "As demonstrated by our successful track record in securing and executing public-private partnerships, we are well-positioned to capitalize on incremental government programs."

Udell added that the telco would "remain flexible" with public-private partnerships and seeking federal broadband funding.

"We'll remain opportunistic as we pursue a public-private partnership or [...] the infrastructure funds [are] made available from a federal government perspective and allocated by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration," he said. "That's a key focus of ours."

When Consolidated completes the FTTH network at the end of this year, it will provide 3,000 homes and businesses in Ellensburg with 2 Gbps fiber broadband services.

...serving the area that it struck a deal with to build fiber services throughout the city. When Consolidated completes the fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) network at the end of this year, it will provide 3,000 homes and businesses in Ellensburg with 2 Gbps fiber broadband services.

The study concluded, "Improving broadband capacity and service in Ellensburg is critical to our ongoing economic development success, and Consolidated's leadership in investing in Ellensburg will take our internet service to a more competitive level."

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Consolidated Communications says it has already built fiber to most of downtown and told CenterFuse it will

bring fiber to any business that wants it.

Two things boded well for Consolidated in its partnership with Ellensburg. First, the telco told Ellensburg officials it was willing to bring fiber to businesses anywhere in the city, but not always without upfront construction fees. Second, Consolidated already provided DSL to a company located outside downtown.

Though the prospect of having a fiber-based connection was compelling, existing Consolidated customers wanted service consistency. "People who had those DSL speeds were customers of Consolidated who did not want to switch," Reich says. "When Consolidated learned of our study and started talking about what investment

the telco would be willing to make in Ellensburg, it opened the door for a partnership between a business that wants to expand in the city and a community that likes it."

Besides Consolidated, the city had a mix of cable operators, including Charter/Spectrum and broadband wireless operators Symplified Technologies, WIFiBER and Kittitas Broadband.

Ellensburg also operates City Fiber, an ISP it owns and operates as a public service that provides for local municipalities and public agencies. Ellensburg has been providing fiber services to local municipalities and other public agencies in the community since 1999, and the city began offering internet service in 2017.

"The city of Ellensburg has fiber service to institutions such as schools and the fire department, but Consolidated is the preferred provider," Reich says.

Consolidated has submitted several permits to the city, and at least one was approved. "Consolidated is well on its way," Reich says. "It has had meetings with the necessary regulatory bodies."

CONSOLIDATED STRETCHES ITS FIBER GROWTH

Consolidated has an aggressive fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) buildout plan to provide symmetrical, multi-gig fiber internet to more than 70 percent of its service area by the end of 2025. Fiber network builds are underway in California, Illinois, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Texas and Vermont.

During the second quarter, the telco continued to progress in rolling out fiber-based services, passing another 142,300 new locations. This tripled the telco's fiber passings in six quarters. Consolidated now serves more than 800,000 sites with fiber.

In the first six months of 2022, Consolidated built fiber to 226,000 locations. Bob Udell, CEO of Consolidated, said it's "on track to achieve roughly 1 million total fiber locations this year as we upgrade [more than] 400,000 passings by the end of 2022." He added, "each of these operating milestones reflects a key inflection point and positioned us for a return to revenue growth with our fiber build execution."

Consolidated also made inroads on the subscriber front, adding 9,600 fiber customers and achieving three times fiber subscriber growth year over year. Consumer fiber revenue grew 28 percent to \$68 million so far this year, driven by more than three times consumer fiber net adds. What was significant about this growth was that the fiber gain surpassed DSL losses for the first time in seven years. "Eighty percent of our net adds are new fiber subscribers, with more than 65 percent of those subscribers choosing our 1-gig service," Udell said.

But the company is not sitting still. Its Fidium fiber broadband product is now available in 150 communities, and it launched at 2 Gbps symmetrical speeds at the end of June. "[Though] it is still early, we are pleased with the customer interest and reaction to our 2 gig promotions," Udell said. "And, importantly, Fidium 2 gig further solidifies our position as a technology leader in the markets we serve."

STUDENT HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES

Located in Central Washington state's Kittitas County, "Ellensburg is a college town on steroids," Reich says. The city is home to 20,000 people, 10,000 of which are undergraduate college students at Central Washington University.

First-year students are required to live on campus, so just shy of 3,000 of the 10,000 students live in residence halls.

Today, CWU leases dark fiber from the city because it is an institutional client Ellensburg serves. But Reich points out that many students live in off-campus housing that could leverage a fiber broadband connection for conducting classwork and other activities. "They will benefit from this service," she says.

A GROWING POPULATION

When Consolidated completes its fiber broadband build, it could be a key attraction for residents and businesses.

Half of Ellensburg's population is made up of college students who will benefit from the new high-speed service from Consolidated.

Ellensburg is already experiencing ongoing community growth. According to the 2020 census, Kittitas County's population is listed as 47,935, up 17.2 percent from 2010. The growth rate in Ellensburg mirrored that of the county. Ellensburg's population grew at 15.4 percent – from 18,301 to 21,111.

"We're experiencing much higher population in-migration than other parts of Washington state," Reich says. "We're only 90 miles from the Puget Sound area, and we have remote workers headed here."

Reich says she knows people who telecommute. "I have a friend who

lives on a road with seven homes, and six of them have people who work from home," she says. "Having a reliable, secure, consistent service with Consolidated will be a game-changer." ❖

Sean Buckley is the editor-in-chief of **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES**. You can contact him at sean@bbcmag.com.



The Leading Broadband Event for Multi-Housing, Commercial Properties, and Communities

Broadband Communities Magazine *Congratulates*

xfinity communities

For becoming an Enhanced Gold Sponsor
at the 2023 Broadband Communities Summit

For more information on XFINITY, visit www.xfinity.com/xfinitycommunities.

You are cordially invited to come see XFINITY at the upcoming



MAY 1 – 4, 2023
HOUSTON, TX
The Woodlands Waterway
Marriott Hotel & Convention Center

To Exhibit or Sponsor contact: Irene G. Prescott
irene@bbcmag.com | 505-867-3299

For other inquiries:
877-588-1649 | www.bbcmag.com

