

Broadband Is More Than Infrastructure

Communities are developing a wide variety of strategies to tackle the digital divide.

By Julia Pulidindi / *Advantage Engineers*

For local governments that invest in broadband infrastructure, a critical component of success is ensuring that their communities have access to the infrastructure and take advantage of its benefits. Access to high-speed broadband Internet is becoming vital for businesses and economic development, and most cities recognize its importance. Broadband adoption and use, which were once commonly overlooked, are equally important for economic development and are now beginning to get their fair share of attention.

When the FCC released the National Broadband Plan in 2009, the key rationales it cited for deficient home Internet access were cost, lack of relevance (“I don’t see a need to have Internet at home”) and digital illiteracy. This has changed since 2009. A December 2015 report from the Pew Research Center, *Home Broadband 2015*, shows that 69 percent of Americans today believe a lack of broadband at home is a major disadvantage to finding a job, accessing health care or obtaining other vital information. (In 2010, only 56 percent of Americans believed that not having high-speed Internet at home was a major disadvantage.)

Investments in wireless infrastructure and the relative affordability of mobile devices have contributed to increased usage of and demand for Internet services. Use of traditional telephone services is declining, and mobile phones are replacing landlines as households’ primary communication means. This is indicative of society’s growing need for

information, speed and reliability in day-to-day communications. However, broadband in the home is still critical to fully realize a community’s economic potential.

Though mobile broadband offers convenience and information that allow users to make better-informed decisions, home Internet is still a necessity. Households are increasingly cutting the cable cord and opting for Internet-only subscriptions. In May 2015, Comcast, the largest U.S. cable provider, reported that its Internet subscribers outnumbered its cable subscribers. This is due to the availability of video streaming packages that allow households to easily opt out of cable services without losing access to what they are interested in viewing. As more sports programming becomes available online, research indicates the trend will only increase. This phenomenon underscores Internet in the home as an invaluable resource and a game changer in how people make decisions about how they consume information.

A desktop or laptop computer with Internet access offers a better alternative to mobile broadband for such tasks as applying for a job and doing homework. FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel recognized this connectivity gap and coined the term “homework gap” to describe a common education obstacle for schoolchildren.

Rosenworcel said in a response to an April 2015 Pew Research Center report, “There was a time when doing basic schoolwork required no

more than a little bit of quiet, a clear workspace and a pencil. No more. Today, seven in 10 teachers assign homework that requires Internet access. Kids may be connected in the classroom, but if they are disconnected at home, getting basic schoolwork done is hard. Researching a paper and applying for scholarships and jobs is tough without reliable broadband access. But as the Pew Research Center demonstrates, 5 million American families with students at home go without regular broadband access – and fall into the Homework Gap. This is the cruelest part of the new digital divide. We need to bridge this gap and fix this problem because our shared economic future depends on it.”

A similar reality exists beyond school in the working world. Many employers are moving toward online application submissions, and applicants can struggle to create a résumé or write a compelling cover letter on a mobile phone.

SCHOOL AND LIBRARY PROGRAMS

To satisfy the need for Internet in the home, the FCC recently reformed and streamlined the critical E-Rate program, which provides discounted telecommunications services to schools and libraries to increase access in these community anchor institutions. In addition, schools and libraries are developing innovative solutions to ensure that students and job seekers have access to fixed broadband services when home Internet is cost prohibitive. For example, the Gwinnett County Public Library in Georgia launched a program called JobSmart, which offers career development services, resources and programs for job seekers and entrepreneurs. JobSmart provides laptops to check out and use within libraries, which helps job seekers who cannot afford computer hardware or home Internet subscriptions.

Understanding that the environment plays a role in productivity, the Chicago Public Library system created the Eliminating Barriers to Access Program, which changed the system’s computer use and fine policies, made laptops and software available for public use and relaxed its beverage policy. These seemingly small changes create a new standard for how libraries function and can encourage greater use by those who need access.

Schools have also taken significant steps to meet the shortfall in home broadband access. For example, Decatur City Schools, the public school system in Decatur, Ala., received grants to provide laptops to students. The system’s teachers now have access to digital content, which provides a variety of ways to educate students. The grants allow teachers to structure classes to ensure that students receive and understand content correctly. Roanoke County Public Schools in Virginia have a 1:1 laptop initiative so students have access to industry-standard software that will qualify them for opportunities such as internships with local fast-growing companies. The school system also provides online courses so students can earn high school diplomas while working on associate degrees from local community colleges.

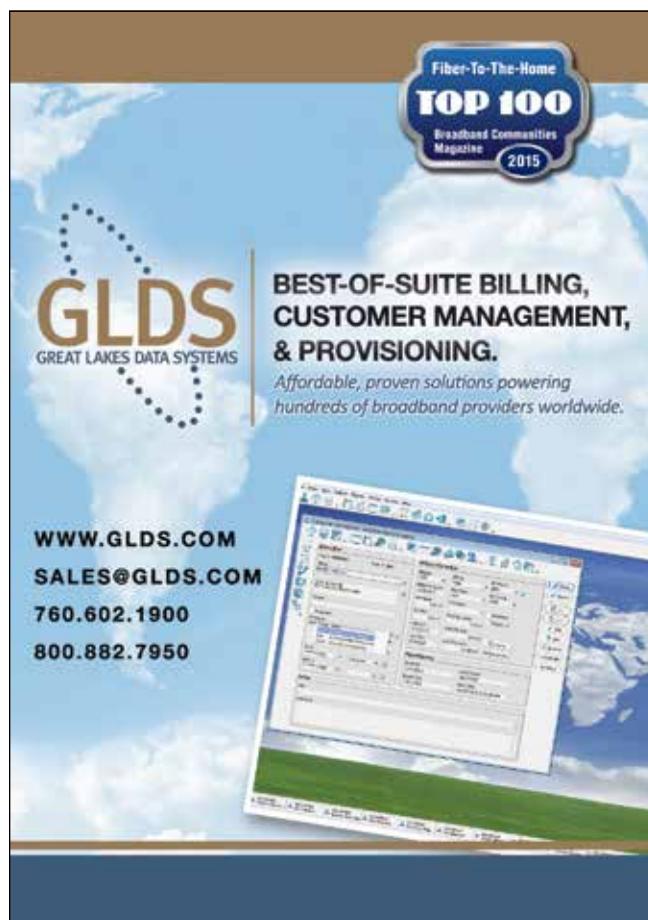
Though investment in broadband infrastructure, engagement with the right stakeholders and cost of Internet service are critical to localities’ economic development plans,

communities cannot ignore the importance of digital literacy as a vital aspect of sustained, long-term growth.

At the National League of Cities’ 2015 Congress of Cities conference in Nashville, Tenn., thought leaders from business, government, academia and the nonprofit sector discussed community strategies to guarantee access and resources for broadband. Proposed solutions ranged from investing financial resources in digital literacy programs to working with local stakeholders, such as community development groups and local businesses, to repurposing such existing resources as older computers or community spaces to create cost-effective learning areas for residents.

Communities need to be bold and strategic about how to meet their residents’ broadband needs. The old adage “there is no one-size-fits-all solution” is true even in the broadband world, but with some out-of-the-box thinking, communities can create innovative, sustainable approaches to meeting residents’ digital literacy needs. ❖

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