

Multifamily Broadband Council Transitions Its Membership to WISPA

Synergies between the organizations made the choice a natural one.

By Valerie M. Sargent

With a new year comes new change for the members of the Multifamily Broadband Council.

HISTORY OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE

MBC has been the only trade association representing companies that deliver unique, personalized broadband solutions to multifamily communities, multiple-dwelling-unit (MDU) properties and other multitenant environments. Its members are nonfranchised companies and their vendors that specialize in deploying connectivity solutions for the multifamily marketplace.

In 2016, MBC sprang forth from the Independent Multifamily Communications Council (IMCC), created in 2001 to advocate on behalf of independent broadband providers and private cable operators (PCOs) doing business serving multifamily communities. IMCC was formed from the prior organization, the Independent Telecommunications & Cable Association (ICTA), founded in 1995. Its executive director, Bill Burhop, was instrumental in the organization's inception in 1995 and was a leading advocate for the private cable industry during his long tenure with the organization. He retired from IMCC in 2013. Burhop led and won many battles before the FCC and lobbied on business and legal issues central to PCOs' success with Congress, FCC commissioners and other important policymakers.

The goal for the collective entities has always been to represent members that employ a variety of communications technologies to foster competitive communications and alternative broadband choices while serving the residential MDU market and competing primarily with both franchised

cable operators and incumbent local exchange carriers (LECs)/telcos. Without the competition fostered by ICTA members, IMCC and ultimately MBC and other emerging technology companies, multifamily owners and their residents would have had little choice among cable and telecommunications providers.

Through the years, as the technological and regulatory barriers between the previously distinct cable and telecommunications worlds were reduced, the FCC had the difficult task of establishing a regulatory framework that would allow both incumbent LECs and franchised cable operators to compete, while simultaneously promoting full competition from alternative sources such as ICTA, IMCC and eventually MBC members.

Over time, the organization had a hand in helping create pro-competition carveouts for smaller, independent providers and providing representation for those providers and clarity for MDU owners on many issues, such as inside wiring rules, exclusive service contracts vs. exclusive marketing agreements, OTARD rules, CALEA, mandatory access, retransmission consent, signal leakage, bulk billing, network neutrality, OTT and Article 52 of the San Francisco police code. A large area of emphasis for the group was the development of a program of excellence laying out the performance standards that provided a road map for members on how to meet multifamily owner expectations, enabling the creation of successful relationships in that market for the benefit of residents.

With its rich 25-year history, MBC went by different names but always served the same purpose: to function as the legal voice of independent broadband providers working in the MDU space, to educate the FCC on the need for

smaller operators to have a say in the face of sweeping regulations being handed down to large franchise cable companies and telcos, and to ensure the “little guy” didn’t get lost in the shuffle. The ongoing vision has always been to secure the viability of independent providers and to enhance competition in the multifamily/MDU landscape while maintaining a good relationship with the primary industry it serves.

As with any industry dealing with technology, we are constantly reminded of the speed at which innovations in broadband communications technology alter the competitive landscape in which independent broadband providers operate. Our members have found success by anticipating future developments as opposed to reacting when it’s too late to change with the times. This has been evident from the early PCO days, to the addition of telephone and internet service, and now to the addition of streaming technology needs calling for robust, reliable high-speed internet service.

A TALE OF TWO ORGANIZATIONS

MBC and the Wireless Internet Service Providers Association (WISPA) have worked together during recent years. MBC partnered on WISPA’s annual WISPAPALOOZA conference and trade show, at which MBC hosted its annual conference as the MDU track of WISPA’s yearly event in 2018 and 2019. (The large event was canceled in 2020 due to COVID-19.) The organizations have similar membership bases, and the synergy between MBC and WISPA became more obvious over time, especially with more WISPA members entering the MDU space.

There have been some policy differences on a few items due to the nature of the customers being served (multifamily owners for MBC and fixed-wireless customers in rural markets for WISPA), but the types of members are the same: independent broadband providers whose services compete with those of franchise cable companies and telcos.

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Given WISPA’s larger size and its strong presence in Washington, D.C., the MBC board of directors decided it was in their members’ best interest to dissolve at the end of 2020 and invest their resources with WISPA. To that end, the two organizations signed a membership option agreement in December, meaning all active 2020 MBC members have transitioned into WISPA and became WISPA members at the beginning of 2021.

As the organizations continued to work together, it became apparent there were more opportunities for alignment. WISPA had more members starting to venture into the MDU space, yet no aspect of its membership was dedicated to multifamily needs. MBC had 25 years of practical application, standards and experience working within that environment and could share those decades of knowledge with WISPA.

With WISPA’s large membership base and D.C. presence for policy matters, the concept of coming together further, especially as streaming and connectivity needs have grown for multifamily clients and customers, offered only benefits for MBC members. They will have access to the many benefits they will gain as WISPA members going forward, and the reception from MBC members about the transition has been overwhelmingly positive.

A NATURAL FIT

“The partnership is a natural fit,” said Claude Aiken, president and CEO of WISPA. “WISPA and MBC members are small, entrepreneurial operators that drive incredible value for consumers and recognize the tremendous need to close the urban and rural digital divide. We’re going to do all we can to open up the multifamily market to competitive entry and deliver the

diverse competition that communities need and deserve.”

“All of us at MBC are excited to become part of the WISPA family,” said Dan Terheggen, president of the board for MBC and CEO of Consolidated Smart Systems. “This timing is an excellent opportunity for everyone in our industry to provide high-quality service to adequately support the needs of those who are learning and working from home. We strongly believe that our combined efforts on behalf of all members will be enhanced by MBC joining forces with WISPA.”

With MBC’s transfer of membership, WISPA will convene a multifamily group within WISPA to allow the robust conversation around multifamily issues to expand and continue. Transitioning MBC members will have immediate access to all the member benefits and resources that WISPA members enjoy and will be able to participate directly in the multifamily-focused group.

“At a time when more and more of our livelihoods depend on adoption and use of broadband at home, it is imperative [that] all Americans, no matter where they live, have affordable options to access the internet,” said Aiken. “We are excited to bring MBC members on board and know they will only make our community stronger than before.” ❖

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