Q&A with Shirley Bloomfield of NTCA

How Broadband Will Drive a Rural Renaissance

The CEO of NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association shares her vision for the rural broadband industry.

As the CEO of NTCA, Shirley Bloomfield represents an organization that supports 850 independent telecom providers driving broadband service opportunities in the rural and small-town U.S. With more than 30 years of experience representing the nation's most rural operators, Bloomfield is an expert on how federal communications policies can sustain the vitality of rural and remote communities and the benefits rural broadband networks offer to millions of U.S. families, businesses and the national economy.

As states look to take advantage of various federal broadband funding sources – including the Infrastructure Investments Jobs Act (IIJA) – a key emphasis will be on partnerships, which will take several forms: public-private partnerships between traditional providers and communities, partnerships between electric cooperatives and other local telcos and partnerships between community providers and electric cooperatives. Hilda Legg, a rural economic development consultant for Legg Strategies, recently talked to Bloomfield about how broadband could create what she calls a "rural renaissance." Following are highlights of the conversation.

BROADBAND COMMUNITIES: *Broadband Communities has promoted fiber deployment for many years. With the unprecedented amount of federal funding becoming available, do you feel like it's a dream come true?*

Shirley Bloomfield

SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD: This is a moment in which policymakers understand the power of broadband connectivity and how it changes lives and the economy. And though there still are some outliers, most people understand the power of fiber. They appreciate that fiber is a superior technology and understand why there's so much merit in doing deployment right the first time, particularly given the

amount of money being spent. There is no reason to take shortcuts or try to do something incrementally. Shame on us if that's the direction taken with these resources. We hear stories of how people chase fiber trucks and ask providers what it will take to build in their neighborhoods. I am excited about connecting the U.S. and ensuring everybody has robust connectivity and services. I almost want to fast forward 10 years from now to see what has been achieved from this funding influx.

BBC: *With the influx of funding, what do you see as the top challenges broadband providers face across the country?*

SB: Though providers have some unique challenges depending on where they are, such as geography, topography or the climate, a couple of things come to mind when I think about getting this funding out the door as quickly as possible. One is the supply chain, which can complicate the ability to deploy promptly. NTCA is working with Corning to create more scope and scale in the fiber demand arena so members don't get pushed to the back of the bus when larger carriers' orders come in. Customer-premises equipment availability is also an issue.

Another challenge with this amount of funding is that sometimes strange characters come out of the woodwork, saying, "I could do broadband for X amount of money." I worry that some communities will be so anxious to get internet service that they will contract with entities that don't have a track record of service quality. Some of this has happened with the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF). Some entities get funding and can't fulfill their obligations because they don't know what to do. I worry that those consumers will be on the short end of the stick and have to wait even longer to get the service they think they're getting in the near term.

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down deployments. At the recent Alaska Telecom Association Winter Conference, representatives I met with cited rights of way as a vital issue. We're thinking about how to streamline these things.

BBC: *People are concerned about ensuring that there's not a patchwork approach to connectivity. Would you agree that providers need to ensure continuity across an entire state or territory?*

SB: I think demanding higher speeds is a perfect thing to ask for. I'd like to see 100/100 Mbps. I support having those as service standards as opposed to rates or performance. The industry needs to emphasize consumer experience, and establishing a reasonable speed requirement will help.

BBC: *NTCA members provide robust infrastructure in rural communities, but now the challenge is to provide broadband in communities that NTCA members do not serve. Do you see members rising to this challenge?*

SB: I do, and I think this will be the ultimate win-win. NTCA member companies have already been thinking about how they edge further out, partly because of people chasing their fiber trucks across the highway. NTCA's latest fiber survey showed 75 percent of members offer fiber-to-the-home service. Significantly, more than 30 percent of NTCA members' consumers have gigabit service. Ten years ago, I would have told you I can't believe rural consumers would demand, much less buy, these speeds. The USDA ReConnect Loan and Grant Program has been a significant opportunity for NTCA members to extend service into neighboring

communities where mid-size or large carriers have chosen not to invest. The other exciting thing is that it's not necessary for service areas to be contiguous to providers' locations anymore. One Minnesota provider manages a broadband network 200 miles away from its headquarters. The industry will see more providers operating and building networks from afar.

BBC: *How do you see partnerships evolving?*

SB: What's interesting about the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program money from the infrastructure act is that it promotes public-private partnerships. We see exciting collaborations popping up between many different entities through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act money. It will be a way to fill the gaps in places currently waiting for connectivity. If NTCA members ever want to expand, this is a way to have local partners be the boots on the ground so the providers can do what they do the best. NTCA members provide broadband. They know how to build it, how to run it, how to manage it, and how to market it. However, somebody else may have physical assets, and somebody else may have a customer base. We're thinking about the strengths each partner can bring to the table. It's finally coming to fruition.

BBC: *What challenges do large amounts of funding passing through state offices present for building continuity and ubiquitous broadband?*

SB: I think it's excellent that the law accounted for the fact that some

BEAD Program money goes to states to create plans and set up broadband offices. But we have to make sure that in the 50 states, there are not 50 different ways to make sense of the standards, determine how things will be established and define what people should be looking for. This is a lot of money: Consider that $100 million for each state is the baseline, and money hasn't flowed this way for broadband in the past.

When I look at it from NTCA members' perspectives, I think they need to get to know their state leadership. Broadband is an industry that, for the most part, has had little interaction with states. Service providers are not regulated anymore on the state level, and some of the challenges are educating state policymakers on what broadband is and why fiber is important.

State officials are getting a full-court press from everybody and their brother saying, "I can do it. Look at 5G. Satellites are great." I think state officials need to find some credible sources. Entities such as The Pew Charitable Trusts have done an excellent job of devoting time and effort to educate states about what to look for, technology differences and pitfalls.

BBC: *There are 50 different ways to roll out broadband in every state, so it's going to be an exciting time.*

SB: I agree. States such as Minnesota have border-to-border programs. Then there are states trying to figure out whether to put broadband in their departments of commerce or economic development. Another issue is staffing. If broadband providers struggle to find technical staff, finding people to work in the state government offices will also be challenging.

BBC: *Multiple agencies offer broadband funding. How is NTCA updating members on this flow of funds? Can you also talk about the NTCA Broadband Opportunity Hub?*

SB: We're very excited about the hub. NTCA established a special place on its website to make finding information about what's going on easy for members. We titled it NTCA.org/opportunity because we believe it's an opportunity for our member companies. NTCA is partnering with the American Cable Association to create a state tracker. We don't have the resources to figure out what's happening in 50 states, but that information is relevant. Lessons can be learned from what individual states are doing, how awards are made, and where comments are made. To the point you made about avoiding a patchwork, the question is this: How do we ensure the most consistency? The tracker will show every state's process, rules and awards. It will be a living, breathing tracker.

NTCA has also been spending a lot of time thinking about state offices. They're going to have an unprecedented amount of money, and some will need support. NTCA partnered with the Fiber Broadband Association to create the Broadband Infrastructure Playbook, which will provide state governments with a set of best practices on building networks and information about technologies as they seek to implement the BEAD Program and put funding to the best possible use.

Now that agencies are starting to roll out funding, the hub provides a place where people can register and see archives of the NTCA webcast so states can follow our advocacy efforts. It's a one-stop shop. Having information all in one place will make retrieving it easier for state executives, providers or state fiber networks that might benefit from it.

BBC: *Can you provide examples of partnerships NTCA members have engaged in and the challenges and outcomes of those partnerships?*

SB: One that I've enjoyed watching so far is in Vermont. Using CARES Act money, the state set up utility councils that do economic development and utility work. They partnered with Waitsfield Champlain, an NTCA member and community-based provider in Vermont. Waitsfield Champlain also partnered with the National Rural Telecommunications Cooperative to help build out fiber infrastructure throughout the state. The exciting thing is that the utility councils are working with a state-run government unit focused on economic development to do all this. They will focus on getting colleges and health care centers involved.

In Abbeville, South Carolina, West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative (WCTEL) partnered with Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative (BREC) to form Upcountry Fiber, which is bringing fiber to customers in the electric co-op's territory and the middle portion of the state. Talk about how two great rural utility leaders put their heads together to solve their community's issues. For example, the electric utility and co-op workers stopped at a fast-food restaurant in the region. When the existing carrier network that serves this fast-food restaurant went out, it wouldn't be back online for four or five days. The co-op guys said, "We can do this," and got service up in 24 hours. Of course, the fast-food company is now a customer.

We also see partnerships that haven't worked out, such as Wisconsin-based Richland Grant, a collaboration between telephone and electric co-ops. The electric co-op finally said, "I think this isn't our sweet spot, and you've brought broadband out here, so you just run it."

BBC: *What are your thoughts on how electric and telephone cooperatives could collaborate to serve underserved communities better, and what are the most difficult challenges to that collaboration?*

SB: It's all about personalities. It's about getting the two leadership

teams to be compatible and seeing it as a collaboration and a win-win. Sometimes these utilities are used to being the top dog in the community. It's putting the egos aside; it's looking and asking, "What can we do better together than we could do independently?" When I first asked people why one did not get off the ground, it came down to personality clashes. Next-gen leaders, for the most part, tend to be a little bit more collaborative. These leaders probably grew up with more of a collective leadership mindset. The other thing I would say is I hate to see overbuilding. For example, it pains me to see an electric co-op in those communities already served by fiber from a telephone co-op putting in its plant. There are so many places to build that I think those resources could be better utilized.

Electric co-ops should not rule out community-based providers that are not cooperatives as potential partners. Sometimes electric co-ops are more hesitant because the community provider is not a co-op, but it has the same local philosophy. NTCA is hoping to help break down those perceptions and get discussions up and running. I think those will be important to watch and showcase because they will show that it's possible for a for-profit and a nonprofit organization to figure out how to partner. NTCA represents the country's 270 telephone co-ops, and it has many more community-based providers that are not cooperatives than co-ops. Certain states haven't created a friendly environment for telephone co-ops. To create partnerships, let's not get so caught up in the corporate structure, but think more about local and community-based opportunities.

BBC: *One electric cooperative owner told me during the Fall 2021 BROADBAND COMMUNITIES Summit that partnerships are about trust. I think*

that's a perfect word to think about in building partnerships. Do you agree?
SB: I think so because the way the BEAD Program will eventually be structured, it really will look at partnerships. I think it will prefer community-based partnerships. The Build Back Better bill wasn't created to give AT&T a ton of money. One message for the next few years is this: Start talking, and if there's an area in which you want to build, start thinking about it because if you're not interested in it, somebody else will be. It will help if you think about whom you can work with and where it makes sense.

BBC: *What is your vision of rural communities when this funding has been put together and tested across the U.S.?*
SB: We've learned so much during the pandemic about things that are

important. I believe the funding could create an actual renaissance. What has people thinking about relocating to rural America? These are areas without traffic where people might be closer to nature, have the ability to raise their kids differently, and know their neighbors' names. This investment could be the launching pad for a genuine rural renaissance. During the pandemic, the country recognized the need for connectivity and that people can work from anywhere. Let's couple that with revitalizing some areas that have a close sense of community and a terrific workforce just waiting to be tapped. My vision is broadband will fuel that renaissance. ❖