

# Southern Tier 8's Broadband Plan To Drive Economic Growth, Improve Quality of Life in New York State

A regional planning board syncs up with local providers to bring fiber-based broadband to the state's hardest-to-reach communities.

By Sean Buckley / *Broadband Communities*

**S**outhern Tier 8 Regional Board, a multifaceted planning and development agency in New York state, sees broadband as an opportunity to improve the economic situation of the rural communities it serves.

“High-speed broadband is just about the most important piece of infrastructure for the Southern Tier and central New York regions to attract the jobs of the future and enhance quality-of-life and overall opportunity,” said Jennifer Gregory, executive director of Southern Tier 8 in a release announcing Project Connect, an initiative to connect the agency’s entire eight-county region to high-speed broadband.

Southern Tier 8 cites Chattanooga, Tennessee, as an inspiration. There, the local power provider, Electric Power Board, built a fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) network – one of the first 1 Gbps-capable FTTH networks. A 2021 study by Bento Lobo, who holds a doctorate in financial economics and teaches economics at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, revealed that high-speed fiber broadband in the Chattanooga region yielded \$2.7 billion over 10 years in economic impact and created nearly 10,000 new jobs.

Gregory hopes the presence of fiber-based broadband will enable similar economic opportunities in rural parts of New York.

Although the area it covers is very rural, the communities within Southern Tier 8 territory have good highway access to interstate I-88 and are three hours from New York City.

To make Project Connect a reality, the Southern Tier 8 Regional Board applied for a \$22 million federal National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) grant to connect 895 addresses among New York state’s hardest-to-connect residences to fiber-based broadband. The NTIA grant will introduce residential addresses in the towns of Caroline, Coventry, Danby, German, Guilford, McDonough, Newfield, Oxford and Taylor to fiber-based broadband. All 895 addresses in the 10 towns are rural, with no access to broadband service.

The pandemic highlighted the disparity of available broadband. “All of a sudden, broadband was reprioritized for our rural communities,” Gregory says. “We have been able to develop applications, gather data and launch Project Connect with NTIA and several others to get service to the most rural areas across the region.”

As Southern Tier 8 moves its broadband plans forward, it’s focused on several initiatives to understand the trouble points in the region. It’s providing public education and outreach, advocating for policy changes within the



state to increase buildouts without implementing taxes on existing ISPs, and positioning the counties to apply for funding and be prepared with American Rescue Act (ARPA) dollars.

### **MAPPING HINDERS PROGRESS**

Mapping broadband availability is fraught with challenges. The FCC's broadband maps have come under criticism for overestimating coverage. An entire census block is considered served if one home has internet access.

What's more, there are several discrepancies regarding the number of homes that can access broadband. The FCC says more than 14 million households nationwide can't access internet at even a 25/3 Mbps connection. However, BroadbandNow, a website providing detailed information about pricing and coverage, claims the figure is closer to 42 million households.

Congress passed bipartisan legislation in February 2020 requiring the FCC to collect more-accurate data. This follows a 2019 mapping pilot by USTelecom. The FCC allocated \$98 million for the new mapping plan in December 2020, but implementation has lagged because of a slow

procurement process and other delays due to protests over a mapping contract.

FCC Chair Jessica Rosenworcel sent a letter in response to U.S. Rep. Victoria Spartz's request for "a timeline for completion of broadband maps capturing the nation's access." Rosenworcel provided a number of updates about the work that's going into the new maps, but her letter did not include any details about the project nor a timeline of when it will be completed.

"Although the FCC was awarded funds to draft a new broadband map, we knew that would take some time," Gregory says.

### **BETTER CONNECTION PROGRAM**

Gregory is frustrated that the FCC hasn't completed more accurate mapping. The lack of good maps makes meeting funding application deadlines impossible for states and local communities. "If you're positioning your counties to apply for this funding, the policy side may be lining up, but the logistics of getting that rolling just aren't there yet," Gregory says. "It's not like you can say, 'Can you extend that deadline until the maps are corrected?'"

As a result, Southern Tier 8 is

administering surveys and completing mapping ahead of the FCC's actions so it can take data to the state.

For instance, to gauge how rural communities feel about their current broadband status, Southern Tier 8 created the Better Connection program. It includes the cartoon character Angry Andy and enables residents to vent about broadband.

"We wanted to add a bit of humor to the process because people hate surveys, especially in New York state," Gregory says. "We thought it would be fun to make it like a game for folks."

Southern Tier 8 uses residents' survey and internet speed test results to generate compiled statistics for grants and other funding opportunities. The data gathered through the website is consistent with NTIA data about areas where broadband is needed.

Southern Tier 8's planning and economic development partners in each county help push support for the Better Connection program via Facebook, personal e-mails and chat. It also provides hard copies of information in libraries for people who don't have internet access.

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### A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

Southern Tier 8 cannot solve the broadband access problem alone. As part of the NTIA grant application, the organization can identify partner ISPs.

Armed with its data to make the case for expansion, Southern Tier 8 asked local ISPs to invest in their communities and pursue the NTIA grant. Southern Tier 8's mapping helped reveal where service ends and, based on the NTIA map, where needs remain. Then, it asked local ISPs if they would be willing to extend their infrastructure. "We contacted ISPs that already had a presence in an area and had prior community support," Gregory says. "Much to my surprise, they agreed to participate."

The providers Haeefe Connect, IWC and Point Broadband will work with Southern Tier 8 to bring fiber to the 895 addresses in the 10 towns listed previously. Chuck Bartosch, general manager of Point Broadband, says that Project Connect reflects its mission to bring service to hard-to-reach communities that otherwise could not get good service. "This \$22 million NTIA grant will serve 895 people who just don't have service and won't likely get it because it's just so expensive," he says. "The grant goes a long way to help the people that need it the most."

### CHALLENGES PERSIST

Several target communities are in very challenging areas to serve. One

community required a local provider to extend its facilities 9 miles. "This was the quickest way an ISP could get there because the community was not being served," Gregory says.

When New York state rolled out its state broadband program, several smaller telcos said they had various challenges serving rural areas. A key challenge was topography, particularly for providers that wanted to deliver broadband wireless services. The topography is hilly, and there are only one or two homes per mile. "These [small] providers noted that though the state will help them invest in building the necessary infrastructure, they still have to maintain it," Gregory says.

Charter's acquisition of Time Warner Cable also posed a challenge. "It made it difficult to capture as much market share as the cable MSO could from other, smaller internet service providers," Gregory says.

### ATTRACTING TELEWORKERS, BUSINESSES

The good news is that Southern Tier regional anchor institutions, such as colleges and health care facilities,

## OVERCOMING FCC MAPPING INCONSISTENCIES

A key challenge for understanding communities' broadband access situations is the accuracy of maps. But FCC maps, based on 477 data that ISPs submitted, often provided inconsistent or incomplete information. To remedy this problem, the FCC is updating its current broadband maps with more detailed and precise information on the availability of fixed and wireless broadband services. According to the FCC, the Broadband Data Collection (BDC) program will give the FCC, industry, state, local and tribal government entities and consumers the tools they need to improve the accuracy of existing maps.

This is part of the Broadband DATA Act, which directs the commission to make fundamental changes to its requirements, processes and approach for collecting data on the availability and quality of fixed and mobile broadband Internet access services throughout the U.S. Under the rules of the act, the FCC put forth rules in July 2020 and January 2021 to establish a new BDC for collecting granular data from providers on the

availability and quality of broadband internet access service, creating publicly available coverage maps, setting processes for members of the public and other entities to challenge and verify the coverage maps, and creating a common dataset (SmartFabric) of all locations where fixed broadband internet access service can be installed.

However, completing these maps isn't without controversy. Not content to wait for the FCC, upstart vendors such as LightBox already are acting. Its nationwide internet connectivity map reveals that almost 60 million Americans still can't get internet access. LightBox said the map was created by combining the company's granular location data with information from 2 billion different Wi-Fi access points.

In November, LightBox Parent L.P. filed a bid protest with the Government Accountability Office challenging the FCC's decision to award a \$44.9 million contract to CostQuest Associates, Inc. to create a Broadband Serviceable Location Fabric.

already have good broadband access. “We’re in good shape with industrial areas – including the 11 universities we have across the eight counties and community colleges – but it’s the workforce housing and people who live in the most rural areas that are still challenged,” Gregory says. “We have pockets of broadband need, and that’s reflected in the NTIA broadband map.”

In addition to connecting current rural residents, bringing broadband to the Southern Tier could make the communities there more attractive locations for teleworkers and businesses. Northern New York and Delaware County may attract people ready to leave New York City, which is only three hours away.

“If you want that small-town feel, we have those downtowns and a lot of fresh air and outdoor activities, so it’s that digital infrastructure that we need,” Gregory says.

In addition, businesses including the yogurt brand Chobani and battery manufacturer Imperium 3 are asking for connectivity at homes to better support their workforces. “Several businesses are saying, ‘We need this because we’re trying to bring employees to the area, and we’re seeking homes that are connected,’” Gregory says.

### **BUILDOUT STATUS**

As it awaits NTIA approval of its applications to expand broadband access via its partners, Southern Tier 8

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is also pursuing other projects with the Appalachian Regional Commission, including middle-mile projects. The Southern Tier Network (STN), based out of Corning, New York, has continued to expand over the last 10 years.

The STN middle-mile network, funded through the Appalachian Regional Commission, continues to secure investments to expand the network to Broome County, reaching several cities, including Ithaca, Stueben, Shenango and Binghamton and surrounding areas in Tioga and Tompkins counties.

Gregory says the middle-mile network could benefit other local ISPs that need alternative middle-mile platforms to support their last-mile traffic. “We’re hearing from the ISPs that they are looking for better long-haul options,” she says. “Because the middle-mile network is municipally owned, it will help with their bottom line so they can pursue buildouts in these smaller communities.”

In the regions Southern Tier 8 will address, the cities and towns it will serve have a mix of aerial and underground facilities to run fiber. Most of the utility poles in the region are owned by New York State Electric and Gas with a small portion of National Grid.

For some STL expansion, Southern Tier 8 has two goals: make smart cities and expand the internet of things. Several poles in the area are municipally owned, which Gregory hopes will help move the buildout forward.

“We’re encouraging a few electric municipal providers to use their ARPA dollars to expand with them as well,” Gregory says. “This seems like a good time to match with the fiber.” ❖

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## **NEW YORK STATE'S CONNECTALL SETS NEW BROADBAND PACE**

Rural broadband continues to be a priority for New York state. In January, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul introduced the ConnectALL initiative to leverage \$1 billion in new public and private investments.

The initiative focuses on various areas to enhance broadband: a broadband assessment program/interactive map, grant programs, a \$30-a-month affordability subsidy, an affordable housing connectivity program, and a digital equity program. It also prioritizes removing fees and outdated regulatory hurdles and leveraging state assets.

“The ConnectALL initiative will empower local municipalities and state agencies to set up nation-

leading broadband infrastructure statewide, ensuring that every New Yorker has access to the internet when they need it,” Gov. Hochul said in a release.

ConnectALL follows New York state’s initial \$500 million investment, called the NY Broadband Program. Through a series of public-private partnerships, the program deployed more than 21,000 miles of fiber, providing access to 256,000 homes, businesses and community institutions.

As a result of the NY Broadband Program, New York state secured high-speed internet upgrades for approximately 2.42 million locations statewide.