

CEO

Barbara DeGarmo / barbara@bbcmag.com

PUBLISHER

Nancy McCain / nancym@bbcmag.com

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Masha Zager / masha@bbcmag.com

EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Steven S. Ross / steve@bbcmag.com

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Sean Buckley / sean@bbcmag.com

COPY CHIEF

Eli Penberthy / eli@bbcmag.com

ADVERTISING SALES ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE

Irene Prescott / irene@bbcmag.com

EVENTS COORDINATOR

Dennise Argil / dennise@bbcmag.com

ONLINE NEWS EDITOR

Marianne Cotter / marianne@bbcmag.com

ART DIRECTOR

Karry Thomas

CONTRIBUTORS

Rollie Cole, Sagamore Institute for Policy Research

David Daugherty, Clarus Broadband
Heather Burnett Gold, HBG Strategies
Joanne Hovis, CTC Technology & Energy
Trevor Jones, OTELCO

Michael A. Kashmer, Digital Broadband Programming Consultant

W. James MacNaughton, Esq.
Christopher Mitchell, Institute for Local Self-Reliance

Bryan Rader, UpStream Network
Craig Settles, Gigabit Nation
Robert L. Vogelsang, Broadband Communities Magazine

BROADBAND PROPERTIES LLC

CEO

Barbara DeGarmo

VICE PRESIDENT, BUSINESS & OPERATIONS

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**BUSINESS & EDITORIAL OFFICE
BROADBAND PROPERTIES LLC**

1909 Avenue G • Rosenberg, TX 77471
281.342.9655 • Fax 281.342.1158

www.broadbandcommunities.com

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Communities Can Control Their Broadband Destinies

There's more than one way to get better broadband – but how should communities decide what's best?

One strength of the United States is that it is decentralized. Power flows from many sources. If one branch of government oversteps its bounds, another branch can check it. If one level of government can't solve a problem, another level can try. If government fails to act, private organizations can address unmet needs. And if the private sector abuses its power, government can step in.

Real life, of course, is far messier than this idealized picture, and independent factions conspire with and against one another in ways the Founding Fathers never intended. But the *possibility* of action at many levels encourages people to look for innovative solutions rather than doing nothing and waiting for help.

Watching this push-and-pull dynamic play out in the broadband realm is both frustrating and inspiring. On the one hand, if the national government had a coherent broadband policy, all U.S. communities might be well served by now, and the nation could have taken fuller advantage of broadband's capability to transform the economy, health care, education, the environment and civic life.

On the other hand, the absence of a coherent national policy leaves neglected communities with some hope and some room for action. Many communities have navigated the obstacles in their paths and taken advantage of whatever options were available. This edition of **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** highlights communities taking several approaches in their quest for better broadband.

COMMUNITY CHOICES

Anacortes, Washington (p. 22), is building a "traditional" municipal network that piggybacks off a fiber optic telemetry system installed through its municipal water pipes. Morgan City, Utah (p. 26), joined a regional open-access community network to take advantage of its economies of scale while retaining control over the city's broadband destiny. Little Falls, Minnesota (p. 30), invested in a business fiber network and then sold it back to the provider that built it. Member-owners of SEMO, an electric co-op in southeastern Missouri (p. 34), expanded the co-op's mandate to include internet access, leveraging the co-op's expertise in building and managing infrastructure. All these approaches are different, but all can succeed. And they represent only a few of the solutions communities have devised.

How should communities make these choices? Ken Demlow of HR Green (p. 38) describes the planning process communities should undertake before coming to a decision. A new report from US Ignite (p. 42) outlines a "decision tree" that cities can use to situate themselves along the public-private partnership continuum. Finally, for communities that choose to work through cooperative associations rather than through local government, Conexon's Jonathan Chambers (p. 48) explains how co-ops can implement community preferences. ❖

Masha Zager

masha@bbcmag.com