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Fiber's Moment Is Now

New sources of federal funding combined with a base of bandwidth-hungry applications are prioritizing fiber-to-the-home investments.

BROADBAND COMMUNITIES' 2022 Fiber-To-The-Home Top 100 list comes at a pivotal moment in broadband history. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) is set to release \$42.5 billion in broadband funds to states through the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program.

Shirley Bloomfield, CEO of NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association, said in a release announcing the Broadband Infrastructure Playbook that "we are on the precipice of once-in-a-generation funding, and we need to help make the most of this broadband moment."

According to RVA's "2022-2026 North American Fiber Broadband Report: FTTH and 5G Review and Forecast," the five-year U.S. capital investment in FTTH will surpass \$125 billion.

UPPING THE SPEED ANTE

EPB set the bar for 1 Gbps and 10 Gbps fiber broadband speeds over a decade ago, and now service providers are eyeing what's next.

For example, AT&T began offering up to 5 Gbps across parts of its footprint of more than 100 metro areas. The telco will bring AT&T Fiber and multi-gigabit speeds to seven new fiber metro areas in Texas, Oklahoma and Ohio by the end of the year.

But these new speed tiers are just the beginning for AT&T. It conducted a 20 Gbps trial out of one of its central offices in Austin, Texas.

Vendors are also ramping up capabilities. During the Fiber Connect show, Nokia demonstrated 100 Gbps speeds downstream on a single PON wavelength.

OVERCOMING WORKFORCE, SUPPLY CHAIN WOES

However compelling FTTH is, two key challenges remain: workforce and supply chain. With an expected 60.8 million homes connected to fiber internet access, ISPs must quickly increase installation staff.

AT&T admits that though supply workforce issues exist, its approach eases the pain. "We're not immune to the inflationary pressures that affect workforce and supply chain, which is why we have chosen to build at a distributed scale," said Chris Altomari, vice president of broadband network product management at AT&T.

Still, Jeff Heynen, vice president of broadband access and home networking at Dell'Oro Group, said competition is driving new builds. "Many of these deployments are to deliver multi-gig services, as operators look to stay one step ahead of their competitors," he said.

By investing in fiber, service providers and communities will be able to meet the rising demand for broadband. The moment is now. ❖

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