

Washington Court House, Ohio, and Horizon Advance Community With Broadband

The Ohio city seizes an opportunity for residents and businesses to establish reliable connections in an age when broadband access is no longer a luxury but a necessity.

By Sean Buckley / *Broadband Communities*

Serving as a destination point for farmers and their families to purchase needed supplies and to sell their crops, Washington Court House is the county seat of Fayette County, located between Cincinnati and Columbus. The community of just over 14,000 identifies as rural but is home to a fair amount of manufacturing.

“Broadband makes our community attractive to businesses and residents,” says Joe Denen, Washington Court House city manager. “We have an increasing flow of folks from the Columbus-Dayton area who want to live in a smaller, rural community.”

Denen adds that “about 90 percent of new residents adapt very well, but some folks are puzzled by not having all the same things they had when they lived in the city. Broadband is one thing to cross off the list that a lot of folks have become accustomed to.”

AN ATTRACTIVE AMENITY

Washington Court House will soon offer fiber-based broadband services. Horizon, an Ohio-based, fiber optic broadband company, is extending its regional fiber network to residents

and businesses in the community. This fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) expansion includes 76 miles of new fiber, passing nearly 6,500 homes and businesses in the area. It will leverage a mix of PON and active Ethernet to deliver services to each home.

In addition, the service provider will offer its Whole-Home Wi-Fi service, a multiroom Wi-Fi system designed to provide wall-to-wall coverage. It’s an ideal solution for homes larger than 1,200 square feet or with multiple levels.

“We see an opportunity for people to have an incredibly reliable internet connection in an age in which broadband has become the norm in their daily lives,” Denen says. “People use broadband for work and streaming video, and it’s cheaper than cable, so fiber-based broadband will provide less expensive, better choices.”

In neighboring Circleville, Ohio, Horizon has many customers who work for major employers in the Columbus market who were the first to adopt its 1 Gbps FTTH service. “They were excited that they could work from home and work for Ohio State University and Nationwide Insurance, but could continue to live where they want to live,” says Misty Tuttle, general manager for business



Joe Denen



Misty Tuttle

operations at Horizon. “The COVID-19 pandemic taught people the valuable lesson that they can work anywhere broadband is available.”

SUPPORTING MORE CHOICES

Like other smaller cities and towns, Washington Court House’s broadband options historically have been limited. Today, the city can access Charter Spectrum cable and AT&T U-verse. U-verse is AT&T’s VDSL2 service, which offers lower speeds ranging from 10 Mbps to 100 Mbps. Denen says that the availability of these services is hardly uniform. AT&T U-verse “is only available in parts of the community,” he notes.

He adds that given that AT&T’s reach is limited, cable is currently the best bet for consumers who want a stable connection.

As mainly a regional player, Horizon is more responsive to its communities’ needs and concerns than large telcos and cable operators that often don’t have the same local presence. “Horizon is great to work with,” Denen says. “Large utilities can be a considerable challenge to work with because they have larger bureaucracies than small providers do.”

SECURING COMMUNITY BUY-IN

In Washington Court House and in any new community in which Horizon decides to establish a new service foothold, the priority is to get leaders on board. Tuttle says the telco sees itself as a partner to every community it serves.

Horizon cites its relationship with Circleville’s mayor and other officials as an example of how to work with other communities it wants to target with its fiber service. “The first thing we do is get their buy-in and explain that this is a business and community relationship, and we need them to be on our side,” she says. “We’re going into people’s neighborhoods and tearing up people’s yards.”

That line of communication is key because when a resident’s property is impacted, the town or city leaders are the first people the resident will call. “We found that if we can get the village



Horizon’s FTTH expansion includes 76 miles of new fiber, passing nearly 6,500 homes and businesses in the Washington Court House area.

officials and county commissioners on our side, it helps spread the word,” Tuttle says.

The telco extends service initially to city administrators, which supports fiber adoption efforts. “We worked up plans to use the city officials and city employees as our beta testers,” Tuttle says. “We give them a discount, get them online first, and get them buzzed about the service.”

BROAD EXPANSION PLANS

Having provided phone, cable and internet as a 127-year-old telco based in Chillicothe, Ohio, a key focus of Horizon is expanding its fiber network into more parts of the state by working directly with communities.

Today, Horizon operates 5,500-plus miles of fiber across Ohio, West Virginia, Western Pennsylvania and Indiana, with data center connectivity and backhaul services that reach to Chicago. With fiber already installed in its Chillicothe territory, Horizon’s FTTH initiative began in earnest last year when it launched plans to bring service to Circleville, Ohio. Horizon

now passes about 6,000 customers in Circleville.

Jim Capuano, CEO and president of Horizon, said in a release that the Circleville build has been a “true resident public-private



Jim Capuano

partnership from the beginning.” Once Horizon activated Circleville, it decided to branch out a bit more.

Horizon has plans for future construction in several communities throughout the region, starting with three this year. In Greenfield, Washington Court House and Lancaster, these builds will respectively deliver:

- 31 miles of new fiber, passing 2,665 homes and businesses
- 76 miles of new fiber, passing nearly 6,500 homes and businesses
- 183 miles of new fiber, passing more than 14,600 homes and businesses.



Horizon has plans for future construction in several communities throughout the region. A big focus will be areas south of Columbus, Ohio.

The FTTH expansion in Greenfield is set to begin construction in April 2022 and will go live to customers in late summer 2022. Construction on the Washington Court House leg will begin in May 2022 and go live to customers in September 2022. Construction in Lancaster will also launch in May 2022 and will go live to customers in November.

Horizon also has future buildouts planned in several communities throughout the region. The company will soon announce builds in six additional markets. A big focus will be in Ohio markets south of Columbus, including Athens and Johnstown.

Tuttle says that what's notable about the target expansion areas is that Frontier, the main incumbent telco, has not upgraded to provide suitable broadband service. "A lot of these AT&T and Frontier territories have been neglected for some time," she says. "We recognized the need and proved we can [expand] quickly as an overbuilder in Circleville and now we're continuing to edge out."

AN EVOLVING LIFE

Similar to many rural telcos, Horizon's roots as a family-owned telco trace to

the late 19th century. It was founded in 1895 as Home Telephone Co., the incumbent local exchange carrier in Ross County, Ohio.

Over time, the provider realized it needed to enhance its identity. Former Horizon CEO Bill McKell said in a Columbus Business First article that evolving from a local telephone company "was a matter of survival that became a vision."

In 2018, Canadian private equity firm Novacap purchased Horizon. With Novacap as the owner, Horizon can continue to further expand its fiber network to more communities. "Novacap has breathed new life into us," Tuttle says.

Horizon's broadband expansion efforts were rooted in building a middle-mile network to serve large businesses and provide wireless backhaul for large wireless operators.

The telco's Horizon Network Partners division previously built a fiber network through southeastern Ohio, including Columbus. It also reaches five other states through service provider partnerships. In 2010, Horizon received Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) stimulus funds to fund the middle-mile fiber network.

"We were an ILEC and got some funding to do BTOP-like projects, but we were focused solely on enterprise and cellular carriers," Tuttle says. "We were passing thousands of homes, but we could never make the math work to serve them. Now we can make the math work; we have Novacap and another investor, and we're ready to go."

Although Horizon already has funding for the current projects it has planned, it has applied for Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act funding to extend service further. "What the funding would do is let us stretch out into even more rural markets," Tuttle says.

Horizon faced contests from other providers when it applied for federal funds, which Tuttle says shows the energy providers and communities are putting into broadband. Charter Spectrum, for one, is aggressively pursuing broadband stimulus funding to extend services deeper into rural areas. As part of the cable MSO's \$5 billion investment, it was awarded \$1.2 billion in Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) money.

"As someone who lives in this rural area, it's exciting that everyone is going for this funding, and everyone wants to drive fiber deeper into their networks," Tuttle says. "Competition is a good thing for consumers, and I want to see the area flourish and people get access to high-speed internet." ❖

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