

Communities Thrive on Fiber

The presence of fiber opens new job opportunities and economic value for communities.

By Deborah Kish / *Fiber Broadband Association*

Communities are defined as social units with commonalities such as a place, norms, religion, values, customs or identity. They may share a sense of place in a geographic area or in a virtual space through communication platforms. Communities offer familiarity, accessibility and relationship-building.

Geographic communities can be organized into three main styles: urban, suburban and rural. People choose where they live based on several factors, including the availability of food, water and jobs. In most cases, affordability is a factor, and in some cases, proximity to family and school systems plays a role. When choosing where to make a sizeable investment, such as purchasing a house or renting, many will look at what amenities a community offers. One amenity – access to high-speed fiber broadband – provides the ability to thrive for individuals and a community as a whole.

Here we celebrate fiber's impact on several communities across the U.S. The benefits range from bringing fiber training programs to an area to boosting revenue and resilience. The value of fiber goes well beyond job creation, social ties, education and telehealth.

CREATING JOBS, DRIVING ECONOMIC VALUE

Fiber has been proven in many ways to be the gold standard in internet service. There are several reasons municipalities and electric cooperatives build fiber networks as options for patrons in their communities. They start with feasibility studies based on data collected from communities regarding availability and customer experience. They document things such as inconsistent speeds, frequency of outages, and value for the price. The results were astounding in some community studies the Fiber Broadband Association (FBA) conducted.

One community's feasibility study indicated that 43 percent of customers experienced download speeds of less than 100 Mbps with one cable provider and "mostly under 10 Mbps" with another via DSL. Common complaints included speed inconsistency and intermittent daily outages. The onset of the pandemic in this community indicated that, on average, household use grew by 74 percent from 2018. The feasibility study determined that bringing a fiber network to the community would create significant and transformational change because local and seasonal businesses would thrive

year-round and have an "economic impact, a real estate boom and an influx of more high-paid professionals who will work from home." This was only one example of many.

The presence of fiber-based broadband also creates two other benefits for a community:

- **Economic Value and Job creation:** In Hamilton County, Tennessee, Distinguished Professor of Finance Dr. Bento Lobo, in the College of Business at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, conducted an academic study in 2020. He estimated that the number of jobs saved or created attributed to high-speed broadband infrastructure (based on BLS population data) was 9,516 over the 10 years following the building and servicing of the town's fiber optic network. Another example is Westfield, Massachusetts, a community that realized more than \$88 million annually in job-related benefits from installing fiber optic broadband. Whip City Fiber, the fiber network built by Westfield Gas and Electric (see: "Westfield Gas + Electric (WG+E) Sets Broadband Pace for Western Massachusetts," January/February 2023), draws revenue from selling dark fiber to local entities that require private networking.
- **Dollars from Fiber Construction Projects Recirculate in the Community:** Municipal broadband benefits consumers and local economies. Municipalities that offer fiber internet service typically do so at a lesser cost to residents – and in some cases, at no charge. The dollars gained from fiber projects go beyond benefits such as job creation. Often, they are reinvested in the community and can fund necessary city resources such as police officers and firefighters' remote access to information. That means faster response times.

Construction dollars also help provide safe environments in communities, such as by using fiber infrastructure for smart grids, connecting streetlights to sensors for smarter crosswalks, and installing smart meters in downtown areas and emergency phones in public parks and along hiking trails. Overall, these valuable resources attract more businesses and people to a community, leading to more subscribers and, in the end, more money to invest in the community or other areas that need funding, such as health care and education resources.

As far back as 1998, Santa Monica, California, began its Telecommunications Master Plan, which included CityNet,



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its citywide fiber network initially created to connect specific customers and institutions and expand the service to the entire city. CityNet officially launched in 2002 and, within the first year, recognized operational savings of \$400,000; by 2017, it averaged \$700,000 per year in ongoing savings.

Wilson, North Carolina, built its fiber network without using taxpayer dollars, which attracted new businesses to the city. In 2015, the city’s chief planning and development officer conducted a study on the “stickiness” or “magnetic appeal” of the community based on the importance of investing in community assets. With such investments, the city can provide better service and a higher quality of life to existing residents and businesses and simultaneously create a stronger

magnet to attract skilled workers. The study revealed that “the more desirable attributes that a community can provide, the stronger the magnet.”

FIBER TRAINING PROGRAMS BUILD COMMUNITIES

The telecom industry is the best-kept secret regarding the many opportunities



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within. About 60.8 million homes are expected to be connected to reliable, high-speed fiber internet, and the U.S. is poised to see a better quality of life for communities nationwide. But with a shortage of skilled workers, there is a push for certifications with extensive knowledge and hands-on skills training within these communities. Now, more than ever, states are working hard at building a workforce that entices people to want to stay – both for the jobs and the benefits the future network will bring.

Unlike major metro areas, small towns across the U.S. struggle to build their economies and attract growth. These are the same towns that can benefit from fiber optic internet. By offering fiber training programs at local community colleges and through veterans programs and high-school career technical education (CTE) facilities, these communities will be able to provide high-quality training to local young people and offer long-term career opportunities that encourage them to stay in the area.

The FBA Optical Telecom Installation Certification (OpTIC Path) program targets communities most likely to reap these benefits. Multiple classes are currently offered at learning institutions in Florida, Maine, Virginia, North Carolina and Mississippi. The FBA is working with state Departments of Labor and veterans programs across the nation, intending to bring trained individuals into the fiber workforce, develop careers and deliver fiber to the home across the U.S. For more information about the FBA OpTIC Path program, visit www.fiberbroadband.org or contact Deborah Kish at dkish@fiberbroadband.org. 🌱