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Bridging the Main Street–Back Road Broadband Divide Requires a Local Touch

Communities engage in diverse broadband buildout strategies to accommodate long-term residential and business needs.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, highlighting the dearth of rural broadband availability, many communities rallied to build networks independently or with partners. They found that when it comes to gaining high-speed internet access, it's necessary to take matters into their own hands.

As a New Englander, I wonder if the newscaster Peter Mehegan would address broadband in the rural communities he visited during the “Main Streets & Back Roads of New England” and later the “On the Road” segments of WCVB’s “Chronicle” program. Beginning in the late 1980s, he drove his 1969 Chevrolet Impala to towns to meet people and talk about local issues. When he retired in 2005, broadband was still nascent, but I bet the small towns he visited would cite it as a key concern today.

In small communities, access to affordable broadband is necessary to conduct schoolwork and run businesses, but many have been neglected by large, incumbent providers that focus their buildout efforts on larger cities and towns to satisfy shareholder expectations. The result: a striking divide between the broadband access available on the main streets and on back roads of the country persists.

Local communities are taking action to improve their broadband situation in three ways: establishing public-private partnerships, building open-access networks, and transitioning from copper to fiber.

NEW BROADBAND FUTURES

In this issue of **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES**, we profile three communities charting new broadband futures. Westmoreland, New Hampshire, established a public-private partnership with Consolidated Communications to install fiber to the home (FTTH) throughout the town (p.34). In Maine, a community-led effort to build open-access fiber networks is underway (p.22). And in Arizona, replacing a fragile copper network with FTTH is helping Saddleback Communications deliver 500 Mbps speeds to the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (p.30).

The broadband builds featured in this issue may be different in scope and design, but they all have a common goal: provide rural areas with the same reliable, high-speed broadband internet urban communities enjoy. Thankfully, an immense amount of federal funding that will make projects like these a reality across the country is becoming available – and not a moment too soon.

Jim Siplon, president of the Warren County (New York) Economic Development Corporation, summed up the need for rural broadband perfectly: “Today it’s life or death,” he said. “[Broadband] is as important as electricity and water.” ❖

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