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The US Needs A Community Broadband Policy

Every community shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel.

Without a national policy governing community broadband, U.S. cities that are not well served by private providers are scrambling for solutions. As high-quality broadband becomes ever more vital for cities' growth and survival, more cities launch broadband projects. Many are finding creative and successful ways to deliver broadband to their communities.

By combining funding and other inputs from many sources – federal, state and local governments; private investors; residential customers; anchor tenants – cities are developing new models for building local networks. Each model is somewhat different, reflecting the political and economic realities in each place.

This issue of **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** showcases several distinct approaches to building community broadband. Ocala, Florida, built a traditional municipal network that has grown organically over time. Springfield, Missouri, is building out the whole city and leasing dark fiber to an anchor tenant. UTOPIA, which operates a multicity network in Utah, is expanding to new cities using a variety of mechanisms, including residential financing, revolving funds derived from tax revenues, and revenue bonds with city guarantees.

COULD WE DO BETTER?

What's wrong with a patchwork system if it delivers so many success stories? We might better ask: How many *more* success stories would there be in a more uniform, predictable system? Every community in the United States manages to build the roads it needs because local authority to

build roads is not questioned, and the mechanisms to finance road building are straightforward and universally available. Yet most communities fail to build the broadband networks they need because they cannot navigate the obstacle course of local and state politics and laws.

A community shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel just to provide a basic utility. For an example of how things could be otherwise, consider Sweden, where regulations for municipal networks are standardized across the country. Municipalities there don't have a free hand – they are limited in terms of geographic scope and the services they can provide. Nor are they completely regulated; they have several choices of organizational form, for example. But within the framework set out for them, they can build broadband in the same matter-of-fact way they build roads. A broadband project doesn't have to be an epic struggle.

The results speak for themselves: More than two-thirds of Sweden's municipalities have broadband networks, which offer an effective counterweight to the country's private networks (that are still doing just fine, thank you). Three-quarters of Swedish households now have access to fiber, and there is a plan to deliver gigabit service to 98 percent of households.

The point is not that the United States should adopt the Swedish system. The Swedish system might or might not work here. The point is that the United States needs a community broadband policy. ❖

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