

Not Ready to Build? Be Broadband Ready.

A town may not be ready to take the plunge on building a network, but there are steps it can take to attract private investment.

By Trevor Jones / OTELCO

I've seen it many times before: Communities endlessly "study" the broadband problem and never take the plunge into building a network. It's understandable. Building and managing a communications network is a big, complex, expensive job. On the other hand, perpetual study of a problem when a community just isn't ready to commit to construction wastes a lot of resources.

Here's the thing: Many communities I've seen do this are also fairly attractive to private capital. Some smart community planning could make all the difference in bringing an ISP to town. This is a great place to start if a community would rather not build its own network.

Here are a few things a community can do to show an ISP that it wants it:

- **Think long and hard before you suppress utilities.** I get it. Utility poles are ugly. They're also there for a reason. In a place like New England, where the ground freezes and the soil is rocky, building and maintaining utilities underground can be expensive. It's even more expensive and complicated in downtown areas where sidewalks, streets and overlapping utilities have to be considered and avoided. Many ISPs severely limit projects where utilities are suppressed or avoid building in the area altogether.
- **Consider an open-access conduit system.** If a community really wants to bury utilities in certain zones, it should consider burying conduit while it has the streets and sidewalks open, then make that conduit available to potential ISP partners for lease on an open-access basis. This is relatively simple to administer and relatively cheap for the community to build while the ground is open, and it will save lots of money for an ISP if the conduits are there after the streets have been paved.
- **Revisit codes for new housing developments.** I've seen towns require developers of large residential housing projects to build all sorts of infrastructure, even schools. New housing developments are one of the most likely places for suppressed utilities, so why not require that developers

bury extra utility conduit as part of the permitting process? These could be managed by whoever has the financial responsibility for maintaining roads in the development, for example, the homeowners association or the municipality.

- **Consider land use rules that encourage dense housing.** This is a tough one for many communities because people don't usually move to rural areas because they want to be close to their neighbors. On the other hand, denser housing is good for the environment, reduces sprawl and preserves open space in town. It also makes communities more attractive to ISPs because density is a key driver in the economics of broadband networks. The closer homes are together, the better the return on investment.
- **Make sure any study includes building a prospect list.** It's easier to forget about the cost of marketing when a community is planning for a broadband network, but getting people to sign up for a new service is an expensive and complicated process. With that in mind, because a community has to measure demand anyway, it makes sense to capture a list of interested residents as part of a study's deliverables and get permission to share it. Having that list of potential customers in hand will definitely shorten the path to earning a return on investment for any ISP that is considering coming to town.

Some of these things will be easier to do than others and may take some time. For example, getting conduit in the ground "as you go" will be a slow process unless a large project happens to be coming right up. It still makes good sense to make code and zoning decisions in a utilities-friendly manner.

These decisions will end up saving money for a town, even if it ultimately does not attract private investment and ends up building on its own down the road. ❖

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