

Public-Private Partnerships Are a Win-Win for Communities And Broadband Providers

P3s have the potential to accelerate fiber buildouts that could create new job and revenue opportunities.

By Deborah Kish / *Fiber Broadband Association*

Public-private partnerships (P3s) between service providers and communities are well-established in Europe and growing in popularity across the U.S. The model in which a service provider desires the next-generation network but may not build, own or operate the network outright can be a great way to deliver a reliable, high-speed fiber broadband network with unlimited capacity to communities.

The two standard flavors of P3s are:

- **Open:** A model in which the wholesale network is owned by a public-private entity and operates as an open-access wholesale network.
- **Not open:** A model in which a single public or private entity does not own parts of the network.

P3S ACCELERATE FIBER BUILDOUTS

As government funding ramps up, fiber builds will grow exponentially. P3s have shown to be instrumental in accelerating these projects as they unite stakeholders in ways that create balance to bring fiber broadband to communities as efficiently as possible.

The benefits of doing so far outweigh the costs, as shown in communities entering P3s across the country.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, the fiber network was responsible for creating more than 9,500 jobs, and in Westfield, Massachusetts, the community's fiber network recognized \$88 million in revenue annually. Deploying fiber broadband through P3s provides additional value because all parties can utilize one another's resources by building on existing expertise in both camps, whether on the business or legal sides. This is especially true for municipalities that have had their fair share of roadblocks with restrictions that make building difficult and, in some cases, more costly.

But obstacles haven't stopped local governments from moving forward and seeking partnerships. The Fiber Broadband Association (FBA) recently received several requests for proposals (RFPs) from municipalities seeking traditional P3s. Some recent examples include Centennial, Colorado, where an RFP was issued for a public-private partnership to utilize and expand

the city's fiber network to benefit the community, businesses, residents and innovative city applications. Centennial's existing fiber network was completed in 2018 and covers more than 50 miles and includes 432 strands of fiber. The city welcomed incumbent and competitive service providers, nonprofit organizations, and nontraditional internet service providers looking to offer services to residents over the existing fiber network and new infrastructure, including more fiber and wireless.

Another example is the fiber and broadband partnership in Gary, Indiana, aimed at bringing high-speed broadband to every home and business. Gary's plan to partner with a service provider (or several) is intended to build and maintain a government middle-mile fiber ring and the infrastructure, and to provide services. The city is leveraging its American Rescue Plan Act funds and working with a selected partner(s) to ensure deployment of commercial and residential retail broadband.

Most recently, West Hollywood issued an RFP to expand and improve

P3s enable service providers to find economically viable ways to build networks, and can be instrumental in building a strong pipeline of line crews, fiber optic technicians and other workers needed for broadband deployments.

broadband infrastructure and service in the city. The city sought to establish one or more public-private partnerships that bring high-speed, affordable, reliable internet to all households and businesses in the community.

P3S FOR TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The benefits of public-private partnerships are not limited to service providers finding economically viable ways to build networks jointly. P3s can also be instrumental in building a workforce. The telecom industry is in a pickle today as it experiences a gap in the workforce. Installers and trainers are in especially low supply. In addition, most existing workers in the fiber industry are on the retirement path; few are in the age range between 20 and 30.

Over time, the evolution of technology grabs the attention of younger generations. Building new applications to solve life issues or make something easier seems more attractive to young workers. But young workers often are drawn to entrepreneurship or to careers with high starting wages and earning potential. Because of this, work performed mostly outdoors, such as that by line crews, fiber optic technicians and construction workers, has fallen out of sight for many young people. This needs to change.

On-the-job training has been a staple in professions in the construction, electrical, plumbing and telecom industries, to name a few. Though certification programs exist, there are not enough. The need for more installers and the lack of instructors results in few options for proper training. To address this, the Fiber Broadband Association launched

the OptTIC Path training course nationwide. It is designed to provide in-depth knowledge and hands-on skills training classes with built-in core artistry values. The course partners fiber broadband service providers with community colleges. They provide facilities and students, and the service providers supply the instructors.

Public-private partnering is a win-win for service providers: It can bring much-needed people to the workforce and helps keep costs low for the community colleges. An instructor is only part of the cost associated with delivering a course. Materials provide hands-on skills students need to learn, such as cable preparation and splicing. Materials, tools and equipment include building closures, optical time domain reflectometers and fusion splicers. An added benefit is that the service providers bring the tools and “consumable” materials necessary, such as lengths of cable, pigtailed and connectors, allowing students to learn the types of cable the service provider deploys.

As more service providers get involved in training programs, they will introduce a wide variety of fiber types, further expanding their ability to build fiber networks and, more importantly, keeping the fiber workforce from being in the same position it is today. ❖

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