

Top Themes from the 2022 NMHC OPTECH Conference

It all boils down to consistent connectivity and proper infrastructure.

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In the first week of November, the nation's top multifamily housing providers and their supplier partners gathered at the Wynn Las Vegas for the annual National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC) OPTECH Conference & Expo. On the agenda? Multifamily operations and technology and how to generate workflow efficiencies while creating a better resident experience.

BROADBAND COMMUNITIES was there as part of an ongoing partnership with NMHC. In the OPTECH Cool Communities sessions, **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** highlighted owners and broadband providers that have partnered to deliver top-notch connectivity to apartment residents. The collaboration and conversation will continue at Houston's upcoming **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** Summit in May 2023.

So, what were the major themes at OPTECH this year? A few topics emerged in session after session centered around the importance of consistent connectivity and proper infrastructure. Here are a few.

CENTRALIZATION, AUTOMATION AND DATA

This year's overarching conference theme was centralizing processes and systems and automating wherever possible. This starts with virtual tours, leasing processes, and marketing as part of a centralized operations strategy, but it is expanding toward centralizing maintenance and other services where possible.

This latest trend has arisen partly due to staffing challenges in recent years. Some companies successfully pool resources or services for small groups of multiple communities. This creates more efficiency and can have a substantial cost-saving benefit – but getting it right while not negatively impacting the resident experience can be tricky.

Centralization and automation also create data going back and forth from communities to headquarters, causing

data transfer challenges. There needs to be more consistency among the different technologies on data reporting, and data definitions are often unique to organizations. A data dictionary or business glossary is an ongoing process and will continue to evolve – it's not possible to wholly finish defining data. Panelists agreed that most insufficient data comes from weak front-end systems, user error in data entry and process issues, so the emphasis was placed on being disciplined to check the data and ensure it's accurate before it is published. That builds organizational trust in the data.

There is a desire to leverage this abundance of new data and analytics to drive decision-making and optimize performance. Machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) can help in this process, but it's still evolving. If data is clean and there is a lot of it, AI can add value and speed to previously manual processes.

Though AI intends to remove biases, there is increasing concern and interest in potential unintentional bias from the algorithms that drive AI applications. Conference panelists recommended viewing AI as a supplement to rather than a replacement for human-driven processes.

Reliable connectivity is essential to all technology-driven processes at the property level as communities transfer data from districts to corporate. But protecting that data and consumer privacy and complying with new and anticipated regulations was also mentioned as a growing challenge.

SMART-HOME TECH AND ELECTRIC VEHICLE CHARGING

Though the options for providing residents with excellent connectivity and innovative home technology have expanded, so have the complexity and confusion about the right path. Attendees explored the entire connectivity and intelligent building landscape, trying to gain clarity on which decisions to make and how best to incorporate access control utilization

for virtual tours, package lockers, smart appliances and other smart amenities.

Knowing which property technology (PropTech) decisions will create redundancy in broadband is vital. So is knowing when to incorporate climate technology initiatives such as on-site solar and storage, LED lighting, and HVAC upgrades that can help landlords reduce part of their emissions and offer a positive return on investment.

The electric vehicle (EV) era is now here. Though there are regional differences in demand, most apartment owners and managers know that EV chargers will likely become essential in the next few years. Currently, most EV owners choose to charge their vehicles at home while they sleep, meaning an expectation is being created that apartments may become the gas stations of the future. But responding to current and anticipated demand isn't a simple calculation, and how to future-proof parking areas for any future EV scenario was the big question.

Retrofitting existing communities with EV chargers is more complicated than incorporating them into new builds. With three different charging levels available, it is essential to consider the electrical infrastructure. From charging stations to shared chargers, distance equals cost concerning how far electricity travels for charging. Some chargers incorporate cellular capabilities vs. Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth is also available. Property owners/operators don't want to drive away prospects for whom an EV charger is required, but installing the proper infrastructure requires getting a fast EV education and making strategic decisions now.

As with centralization, automation and data, smart-home features and EV chargers also require getting connectivity infrastructure right to support these emerging technologies.

MANAGED WI-FI, BULK, AND THE FUTURE OF CONNECTIVITY

Everything must work together seamlessly to create workflow efficiencies and improve resident experience. For many apartment owners and managers, this is where managed Wi-Fi comes into play.

Residents are not yet clamoring for “managed Wi-Fi” as they may be for a “gig” or other clever marketing ideas that have caught on. They want robust, seamless connectivity throughout their community, but don't really know what to ask for.

Though it has captured the interest of many owners and managers, we heard at OPTTECH that managed Wi-Fi providers have yet to figure out how to market the concept to residents. Residents are not yet clamoring for “managed Wi-Fi” as they may be for a “gig” or other clever marketing ideas that have caught on. They want robust, seamless connectivity throughout their community, but don't really know what to ask for in a community to get it. Some education and marketing may turn this technical connectivity solution into a marketable community amenity and brand differentiator.

More than ever, multifamily developers and operators look at connectivity as much more than a basic bulk agreement with a specific service provider. They are considering the deeper aspects of it as part of a more extensive infrastructure play. Many are moving to a “managed services” approach, with one robust network supporting residents' connectivity needs and new intelligent building infrastructure.

Experts stressed that ubiquity is critical, and connectivity today should be more than just zone coverage. Residents will grow to expect the network to service them from curb to couch without any fluctuations in speed or quality. Yet, because much planning goes into getting these networks right to support all the services, future-proofing a community for broadband services can be challenging because technology changes all the time. Multifamily owners are best served by maintaining telecom closet space and adding conduits and pathways to accommodate changes down the

line without tearing up a property to incorporate future technology.

JOIN US AT THE BROADBAND COMMUNITIES SUMMIT

To continue exploring these themes and more, plan to join us in Houston, Texas, at the **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES Summit** to learn more about applications of new technologies and to network with peers, service providers and customers while celebrating the many success stories of broadband in the multifamily industry. NMHC will again partner with **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** in developing the multifamily track agenda.

This year's event will be held at The Woodlands Waterway Marriott Hotel & Convention Center outside Houston in The Woodlands, Texas, May 1–4, 2023. For more information and registration details, please visit www.bbcmag.com/events/summit-2023/home. ❖

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