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Never Underestimate The Power Of a Resident

In some cities, residents of multifamily housing are taking the lead in getting their buildings wired for fiber services.

At last month's FTTH Conference (see Lessons From the Field: Bringing Fiber to MDUs in this issue), four fiber deployers talked about serving multifamily housing. They discussed why retrofitting buildings for fiber was tricky, and they explained the ingenious solutions they developed, with the help of their vendors, to address those difficulties. They also discussed property owners' concerns about putting new infrastructure in their buildings, and they described what they did to allay those concerns.

What struck me most, however, was that two presenters said their phones were now ringing off the hook with MDU owners requesting fiber connections because their residents were clamoring for them. Many of these same owners, when they first heard that fiber-to-the-home service was available to their properties, had said, "Sorry, not interested."

These owners all had valid reasons for not wanting to deploy fiber. Some had agreements with service providers they were happy with. Others were reluctant to allow a new service provider into their buildings without receiving some compensation. (Both deployers that told this story were municipally owned and not legally permitted to pay door fees.) Still others worried about the expense of upgrading electrical or low-voltage wiring in their buildings to accommodate fiber.

In the end, however, their residents persuaded them to allow fiber to be installed. After all, as writers in this magazine have pointed out many times, the value of multifamily buildings depends primarily on rent rolls, not on ancillary

income. When a significant percentage of tenants want FTTH services and are blocked from obtaining them, their frustration is bound to have an impact on the rent roll.

Why do residents go to such lengths to weigh in on a decision that is usually left up to property owners? In another conference session, veteran FTTH market researcher Michael Render of RVA LLC presented the results of his annual survey of broadband users. He found that FTTH subscribers considered superior bandwidth and reliability and, to a lesser extent, better video clarity, to be the most important advantages for fiber.

Bandwidth is critical for users in Lafayette, La., who now have direct peering from home to the high-speed university network. Reliability is critical for users of the new Home Monitoring and Control service that Verizon just introduced in MDUs.

Better bandwidth and reliability are both key reasons that more FTTH users work from home – either by telecommuting more often to save drive time and expenses or by starting home-based businesses. In Render's interviews with users, he found many who were unable to commute for one reason or another and whose living depended on being able to work from home.

The moral is this: Residents know what they need. And they're not afraid to make their opinions heard.

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