

Seizing the Broadband Opportunity

The Broadband Opportunity Council will help communities obtain fiber.

By Heather Burnett Gold / FTTH Council Americas

Last January, President Obama visited FTTH Council member Cedar Falls Utilities in Cedar Falls, Iowa, and announced a government effort to expand broadband deployment and adoption, deliver broadband to underserved communities and encourage new entrants and new investments to improve broadband quality and service. The president chose this fiber-fed gigabit community to announce the formation of the Broadband Opportunity Council (BOC) because, in his words, Cedar Falls showed that “you don’t have to be the biggest community to do really big things; you just have to have some vision, and you have to work together.”

In September, the BOC reported on the steps each of its 25 government agencies could take to increase broadband investment and adoption. The report was unveiled at a White House event to stakeholders who provided comments and recommendations to the BOC, including representatives of the FTTH Council and several of its members.

The BOC made four broad recommendations:

- Modernize federal programs to support broadband investments.
- Empower communities with tools and resources to attract investment and promote meaningful use of broadband.
- Promote increased broadband deployment and competition through expanded access to Federal assets.
- Improve data collection, analysis and research on broadband.

At the FTTH Council, we’re encouraged by the report’s comprehensive approach and recommendations and by the fact that the BOC included our proposals to help broadband providers and communities break down information barriers.

Providers and local communities have no single, easy-to-use source of information on how to access federal funds, obtain necessary permits and adopt successful strategies to deploy broadband infrastructure. As a result, providers spend too much time and too many resources gathering even basic information about project development. This can cause significant delays and additional cost before the feasibility of a broadband deployment can even be assessed. We suggested – and the BOC concurred – that this information should be centralized and inventoried. An online inventory of federal assets, such as Department of the Interior telecommunications towers, can help support faster, more economical fiber deployments to rural areas and smaller communities.

The FTTH Council also recommended an online handbook to help communities and network operators find

funding; deal with access to federal poles, ducts, buildings and rights of way regulations; and deploy networks. We wrote that the handbook should include a collection of best practices that communities can leverage to improve the business case for all-fiber deployments. For example, the Google Fiber checklist enables communities to lower barriers to fiber deployment by gathering information about existing infrastructure, assisting providers with gaining access to rights of way, and facilitating permitting, construction and maintenance processes. Similarly, the FTTH Council Community Toolkit provides strategies for communities to make themselves fiber-ready.

The BOC recommends that agencies develop best practices, provide technical assistance and create portals for broadband resources to support local governments and anchor institutions. The BOC also sees opportunities to engage private, public, philanthropic and nonprofit groups to develop community connectivity indexes and promote innovative practices, investment and digital inclusion. An index will help community leaders understand where their strengths lie and where they need to improve, and it will promote innovative community policies and programs. Tools and processes for community assessment, improvement and recognition will support the index.

For many years, the FTTH Council has said that communities need fiber and can choose among many ways to obtain it. Our message is clear: FTTH communities are empowered communities. Thanks to the opportunities of next-generation networks, these communities are gaining control over the factors that shape the lives of their residents, businesses and institutions. They have competent support systems that make life better – through education, health care, economic opportunity, public safety and efficiently delivered government services. In fiber-to-the-home communities, today’s problems begin to get relief and public and private sector leaders start to capitalize on tomorrow’s opportunities. The FTTH Council applauds the BOC on its action plan for the federal government to expand broadband access in the United States. We look forward to continuing to collaborate on these efforts. ❖

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