

When Murphy's Law Strikes A Broadband Project

Building flexibility into the budget, schedule and deployment plan can save the day when things go wrong.

By Trevor Jones / OTELCO

As hard as we may work on planning, any broadband project will hit some bumps during construction and the ramp up of subscriber traffic. For example, on a recent OTELCO fiber project in Alabama, the engineering contractor unexpectedly lost key members of its staff, causing delays in deployment. In another example, a fixed wireless network OTELCO is deploying for four towns in western Massachusetts has been plagued by a shortage of 60- to 80-foot-tall wooden utility poles needed for deployment.

Things go wrong sometimes. That's just the way it is. No matter how good a plan is, community broadband organizers need to allow for the curveballs nature and members of the community will throw. Because anticipating every curveball is impossible, it's important to build some flexibility into the plan so it's adaptable when the unexpected happens. Here are a few examples of ways to prepare.

BUDGET FOR CONTINGENCIES

As much as we want projects to come in under budget, invariably unanticipated events will cause costs to rise rather than fall. For this reason, building an allowance for the unexpected into a broadband budget is a good idea. Ten to 15 percent will provide a cushion to address minor changes without necessitating going back to voters or state or federal agencies to appropriate more money. For example, when OTELCO's partner in Massachusetts couldn't source tall utility poles in southern yellow pine, it was necessary to source Douglas fir poles from the West at a higher cost.

A community shouldn't hand control of contingency funds over to a contractor. Instead, it should have access to the contingency allowance controlled by the broadband committee and require the contractor to submit a change request to the broadband committee. If there is money left over in the contingency allowance, it can be returned to the general fund or used to deploy Wi-Fi equipment and other broadband-related services in town facilities.

SCHEDULE TIME FOR DELAYS

Delays cost money and cause frustration among constituents, who are anxiously awaiting better internet access. For this

reason, it makes sense to set expectations conservatively when it comes to the deployment schedule. No one will complain if the project is completed early.

Residents are anxious for broadband, and it's tempting to offer them an optimistic view of the schedule during the planning process to assuage their anxiety. But it's better in the long run to resist making them feel good during the planning and budgeting process to avoid letting them down after they have voted. This doesn't preclude broadband community organizers from having more aggressive expectations for their contractors – and they should.

CONSIDER ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

At times, a roadblock will interfere with a plan so severely that it's better to work around it. For example, attaching fiber to the utility poles in a neighborhood may become cost prohibitive if several of the poles must be replaced. In such cases, burying fiber may be the best choice. As another example, in a neighborhood where existing utilities are direct buried, there is no access to conduit, and a homeowners association prevents trenching, a pole-mounted wireless solution may be able to bridge the gap between fiber and customer.

Alternative solutions such as these can cost more money and time, and that's why it makes sense to have a contingency allowance and a flexible schedule. If there's any chance of these things happening, it may be a good idea to build a little extra in specifically to address them.

PERSEVERE

Even after planning for things to go wrong, there will be times when something comes along that is so much bigger than anticipated that flexibility isn't enough. In such cases, going back for more funding and apologizing for delays is the only option. As painful as this might be, the end result will be worth it for the community. ❖

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