# Seattle Launches *B4B-Build for Broadband* MDU Initiative

Among other goals, the city's new initiative aims to promote creating capacity for competitive service options and provide trusted resources for local MDU owners, developers and managers.

By Alice Lawson / *City of Seattle*

I n a tech hub such as Seattle, you might expect all residences have access to competitive options for high-speed broadband, but they don't.

Seattle is fortunate to have three cable operators, offering most neighborhoods two and sometimes three high-speed broadband service options – some including fiber gigabit services. But residents of apartment and condo buildings on those same blocks often don't have the same choices. Residents of multiple-dwelling-unit buildings (MDUs) might have only one option, or options that don't provide the high speeds needed to keep pace with the digital future of ultra-HD video streaming, internet of things (IoT), virtual reality, telemedicine and the many new uses yet to be imagined.

For Seattle, limited broadband options for MDU residents is a digital-equity issue. More than half of Seattleites now live in apartments, condos and townhomes, and 2019 permitting records show nearly 81 percent of the city's new housing builds are MDUs. As Seattle tracks the current and future connectivity needs of residents, it must ensure that local MDU owners, developers and managers understand the importance of prioritizing investment and planning for competitive, high-speed broadband options in new construction and in renovations of older buildings.

## RAISING AWARENESS

To support our MDU community, this spring the Seattle Office of Cable Communications launched its B4B-Build for Broadband initiative. It's an awareness and education effort designed to help MDU decision-makers understand and navigate the challenges of planning for broadband. This is especially important for those who can't afford specialized consultants and telecom planners, and those who have long relied on service providers to do all the investment and design decision-making.

The initiative's website (https://www.seattle.gov/tech/initiatives/broadband/building-for-broadband) provides a central source of information and resources, including a video of a city-sponsored forum outlining steps to make buildings ready for multiple ISPs. A webinar series this past summer covered foundational subject areas for anyone involved in broadband planning. Webinar topics included Broadband 101, Pathways, Wired vs. Wireless, and G.Fast Technology. An upcoming webinar will cover the various types of agreements involved in bringing broadband services to MDUs and tips for property owners to help protect their future flexibility when it comes to service provider options. Interested parties can sign up to receive B4B-related updates, including new webinar offerings and other resources.

## THE RESEARCH

The B4B initiative evolves not only from digital-equity interests, but also from valuable input MDU owners and residents provided as part of a 2017 Seattle Office of Cable Communications survey assessing the state of broadband in the MDU sector. The survey found 95 percent of MDU residents have access to broadband (defined as the FCC's standard of 25 Mbps), but there is a significant lack of *competitive choice* in terms of access to 100 Mbps-plus broadband providers as compared with single-family residences. The survey also found MDU residents who had a choice of service providers were *more satisfied* with their internet speeds than those who did not have a choice. Access to multiple providers is just as important to residents who *do not* have a choice as it is to those who *do* have a choice, according to the survey results.

MDU residents said broadband access and choice are high priorities, and MDU owners reported a need to better understand what's possible with current technology and building for future technology. Building owners also reported a lack of knowledge regarding what could be achieved with access agreements, persistent doubt about the best options for infrastructure and/or access decisions, and a deeper distrust of all telecom/cable providers as compared with other utilities and vendors. Survey respondents expressed a need for a credible source of information to confirm or deny claims from service providers, and they requested a city- or FCC-based resource to provide guidance in several broadband-related topic areas:

- Technology to enhance the construction of future-proofed MDUs
- Availability of service providers by geographic area, and what offerings those providers can supply to residents
- Wiring requirements and why service providers demand certain wiring
- The ramifications of "exclusive use of wiring" or "exclusive marketing" in service contract agreements

Using these survey findings, Seattle's
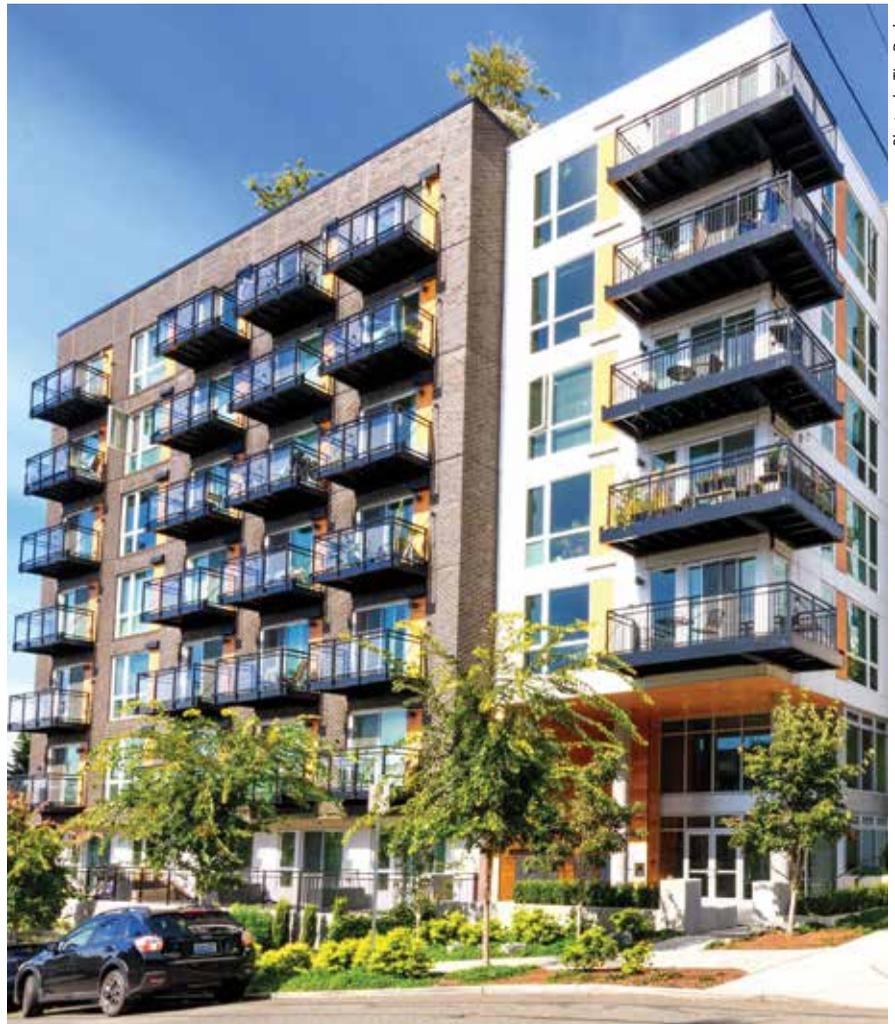


New mid-rise MDU in residential neighborhood accommodates Seattle's growing population.

*Photos by Tim Durkan*

B4B initiative aims to raise awareness about the growing demand for broadband, encourage early broadband planning, and promote the value of creating capacity for competitive service options. It also aims to provide trusted informational resources for local MDU owners, developers and managers to help them prepare, plan and negotiate for broadband services to their buildings.

Seattle's B4B webinar series has attracted a range of participants, including MDU developers for both market-rate and affordable housing, property managers, engineering consultants, attorneys, homeowners association representatives and internet service providers. This variety is encouraging – for every MDU decision-maker B4B can help make more

informed about broadband planning choices, an entire building of Seattle residents will reap the digital benefits long into the future. A refrain in each B4B webinar says it all: *"The broadband decisions you make today will impact the access to competitive, ultra-high-speed broadband your residents will have long into the future."* ❖

*Alice Lawson is broadband and cable program manager for the city of Seattle. She has spent the past decade working on cable, broadband and telecom policy and consumer protection issues. For more information about the B4B-Build for Broadband initiative or to share helpful resources, contact Alice at alice.lawson@ seattle.gov or 206-684-5957.*