

**CEO**

Barbara DeGarmo / barbara@bbcmag.com

**PUBLISHER**

Nancy McCain / nancym@bbcmag.com

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Masha Zager / masha@bbcmag.com

**EDITOR-AT-LARGE**

Steven S. Ross / steve@bbcmag.com

**ADVERTISING SALES ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE**

Irene Prescott / irene@bbcmag.com

**EVENTS COORDINATOR**

Dennise Argil / dennise@bbcmag.com

**COMMUNITY NEWS EDITOR**

Marianne Cotter / marianne@bbcmag.com

**DESIGN & PRODUCTION**

Karry Thomas

**CONTRIBUTORS**

Rollie Cole,

Sagamore Institute for Policy Research  
 David Daugherty, Korcett Holdings Inc.

Heather Burnett Gold,

Fiber Broadband Association

Joanne Hovis, CTC Technology & Energy

Michael A. Kashmer, Digital Broadband

Programming Consultant

W. James MacNaughton, Esq.

Christopher Mitchell, Institute for

Local Self-Reliance

Henry Pye, RealPage, Inc.

Bryan Rader, UpStream Network

Craig Settles, Gigabit Nation

Robert L. Vogelsang, Broadband

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**BROADBAND PROPERTIES LLC**

**CEO**

Barbara DeGarmo

**VICE PRESIDENT, BUSINESS & OPERATIONS**

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The Hon. Hilda Gay Legg

**BUSINESS & EDITORIAL OFFICE**

BROADBAND PROPERTIES LLC  
 1909 Avenue G • Rosenberg, TX 77471  
 281.342.9655 • Fax 281.342.1158

[www.broadbandcommunities.com](http://www.broadbandcommunities.com)

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## Three Paths To Broadband Success

Three award winners illustrate different approaches to connecting the unconnected.

**A**t the Summit in May, Broadband Communities announced three Cornerstone Awards. The awards celebrate organizations that deliver advanced communications for the benefit of end users; the number and type of winners vary from year to year.

Recognizing those who do good work is always a pleasure. This year's collection of winners was unusual, though – for the first time, all three awardees were recognized for bringing fiber broadband to “left behind” areas.

Inevitably, robust broadband will be deployed gradually; inevitably, poorer, more rural areas will be connected later than others, on average. Providers can't build all the infrastructure at once, and they have to prioritize their builds in a way that makes economic sense. What isn't inevitable is the difficulty of catching up, the length of time people must go without adequate broadband and the hoops they must jump through to get it – especially when national policy calls for ensuring that “consumers in rural, insular and high-cost areas have access to modern communications networks capable of providing voice and broadband service, both fixed and mobile, at rates that are reasonably comparable to those in urban areas.”

Large parts of the county where I live are “left behind,” and I see firsthand how frustrating and difficult it can be to move forward without help from incumbent providers.

All three award winners overcame obstacles to deliver an essential service. All the efforts are locally driven, but they proceeded in different ways,

showing that there are multiple paths to success.

**THE WINNERS ARE ...**

**RS Fiber**, originally planned as a multi-municipal build in Minnesota's Renville and Sibley counties, ended up (six years later) as a new nonprofit cooperative powered by seed funding from the towns, a helpful grant from the state and private funding from several sources.

**Valley Electric Association** was already a cooperative – but an electric cooperative, which had a history of supporting farmers and others in Nevada's Pahrump and Amargosa valleys. When Valley Electric built fiber for a smart grid, it seized the opportunity to use the fiber for broadband. Interestingly, both RS Fiber and Valley Electric chose to deploy some wireless broadband in the interim so rural residents would have connectivity while they waited for fiber to the home.

**Greenlight Community**

**Broadband** is a municipal project in Wilson, North Carolina. Wilson's municipal electric utility is building fiber for a smart grid in and around Wilson, and, according to the city manager, “Broadband is the next piece of critical infrastructure that will improve the health of our regional economy.” Wilson has been fighting to extend broadband services to all its electric customers.

Congratulations to all the winners!

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*Masha Zager*

masha@bbcmag.com