

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

ART DIRECTOR

Karry Thomas

CONTRIBUTORS

Rollie Cole, Sagamore Institute for Policy Research

David Daugherty, Korcett Holdings Inc.

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 Communities Magazine

BROADBAND PROPERTIES LLC

CEO

Barbara DeGarmo

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Robert L. Vogelsang

BUSINESS & EDITORIAL OFFICE

BROADBAND PROPERTIES LLC

1909 Avenue G • Rosenberg, TX 77471

281.342.9655 • Fax 281.342.1158

www.broadbandcommunities.com

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Communities Must Have a Voice

To ensure their economic survival, communities must be active participants in broadband planning.

To help prepare for the Fiber for the New Economy conference (held this year in Ontario, California, from October 23 to 25 – don't miss it!), Broadband Communities moved its economic development issue from the end of the year to the August-September issue.

As in years past, we've assembled case studies, analyses and research reports to illuminate the relationship between broadband and economic vitality – a relationship that becomes ever more complex each year. Throughout the United States, people in low-broadband areas know their local economies are suffering. Still, there's no simple solution or formula for success.

Here's one lesson I've drawn from the articles in this issue: *Communities must be involved in decisions about broadband.*

Can you imagine a city's being unable to assure businesses they will have electricity? Can you imagine a community's having no say about the water supply available to its citizens? (The last time that was tried led to mass poisoning and dozens of deaths.) Yet as Bill Coleman reports (p. 32), the details of CAF II-funded (that is, taxpayer-funded) network upgrades are withheld from the communities they affect.

Coleman cites several cases in which providers voluntarily work with Minnesota communities to supplement these upgrades and bring their networks up to state standards (which are higher than FCC standards). Elsewhere in the state (and presumably in the other 49 states), however, there is a woeful lack of transparency. It's hard to imagine how a business can decide where to locate if it

can't find out what kind of broadband service will be available.

"Predicting Broadband Effects" (p. 28) describes a new statistical model that can (roughly) predict potential gains from upgrading broadband speeds in a community. Such a model can help cities decide whether to push providers for better broadband or even invest public funds to help providers or build competing networks. But without information about current networks or providers' future plans, and often without the legal authority to build broadband networks, many cities are effectively unable to put the model's predictions to use.

SUCCESS STORIES

The success stories in this issue all depend on communities – sometimes public officials and sometimes business leaders – making their voices heard. In Ozona, Texas (p. 46), the business community's complaints led a local cable TV company to build an FTTH network. In Indiana (p. 42), towns, counties and economic development agencies work with a cooperative middle-mile network operator to bring fiber connectivity to the places it's needed.

Finally, in Ontario, California – the host city for Broadband Communities' October conference – the city made broadband a centerpiece of its ambitious plan to double in size. Learn more about it in this issue (p. 22) and at the conference. ❖

Masha Zager

masha@bbcmag.com