

Playing by New Rules: A Very Special Summit

Technology, economics and political change are driving a very special Broadband Communities Summit this year.

By Steven S. Ross / *Broadband Communities*

Many publications schedule their predictions and musings for year-end. Broadband Communities tends to work on them in tandem with shaping the program for its annual Summit. BBC staff and committees of experts on multiple-dwelling-unit (MDU) management, rural broadband, economic development and technology spend the early part of each year brainstorming about the hot topics for the coming months. Who knows our industry better than we all do?

We see a great year ahead, followed by many more great years. All the current indicators say so. Housing starts are up to 1.2 million a year – the best since the recession. Living units in MDUs are at historic highs. That all expands the opportunity for easy broadband deployments of all kinds.

In greenfield deployments, fiber to the end user is the obvious choice for broadband because of its unlimited capacity, reliability, inherent security, low first cost and low future operating costs. By the end of 2018, 5 million additional premises will have access to fiber – an all-time-high number of homes newly passed after almost that many were added in 2017. In fact, 2018 will cap four years of exceptional growth.

Who's deploying fiber? Everyone – cable companies and telcos, large national carriers and small regionals, municipalities, electric co-ops and corporations. Why? Jobs! New ways to use broadband include the internet of things, over-the-top video, connected cars, telehealth and more.

On January 8, President Trump signed an executive order expediting requests to locate broadband facilities in rural areas and a memorandum supporting broadband facilities on properties managed by the Department of the Interior. These documents specifically mention only wireless towers, but White House staffers have suggested that rural carriers might have more access to federal dark fiber. Later in January, a leaked PowerPoint presentation from a National Security Council staffer seemed to suggest that the federal government might build a nationwide 5G wireless network – a suggestion that Republican FCC commissioners and national wireless carriers promptly threw cold water on.

Behind the confusion lies more than concerns about international competitiveness in broadband. Driverless vehicles, especially in urban and suburban areas, will rely on roadside

5G networks in just a few years. How will drivers get access to those networks? Will access be free, as are most roads? Will a mandatory fee be imposed when a car is registered or sold? Will home broadband service include broadband for cars? Or maybe gasoline tax revenues will be used to pay for connected-car access as an inherent part of any road.

At the Summit this May in Austin, speakers will examine what can be done now to improve business cases for network deployments. Adding just 10 percent more users can double potential profits and build political and economic support for local networks. In addition, the Summit will cover advances that have improved the case for open access, or at least for shared access to broadband facilities. Does it make sense for multiple carriers to overbuild one another with 5G microcells outside cities? How are advances in distributed antenna systems and other “cell booster” approaches making deployments more flexible and economical?

Today's networks will be in use 40 or more years from now. They should be easily adaptable for future users and uses. Making networks future proof requires forming partnerships and implementing flexible policies (for example, the rules regarding pole attachments and fiber crossings of federal highways are anticompetitive, and the FCC and federal highway administrators have resisted changing them). In addition, the Summit will explore how individuals and communities can future proof themselves in the face of changing technologies.

Rural broadband providers, public officials, activists and employers must consider social needs, such as rural health care (newly reimbursable in all states). Such needs increasingly require broadband. New this year at the Summit are joint panels on funding opportunities, serving underserved populations, and helping electric co-ops provide broadband. The panels will explore the common goals of underserved rural and urban populations in areas where the Wall Street-driven business case for deployment is less than optimal but where broadband deployments may still succeed bigly. Definitely not fake and not sad!

Join us in Austin, April 30 to May 3, 2018. ❖

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