

Leveraging an ISP's Experience For Community Broadband

Many community fiber networks now outsource service provision. Here are some guidelines for making such a relationship a success.

By Trevor Jones / OTELCO

Across the United States, communities large and small are evaluating the availability of advanced broadband communications for their residents and weighing the difficult decision of jumping into a business they know very little about. They are allocating tax dollars and issuing bonds to build infrastructure they see as crucial to community survival.

There is a lot of pressure to ensure that these communities succeed. The towns' credit ratings and residents' tax bills are on the line, and in many cases, the ability of other towns and cities to build their own networks is at stake. When a community network fails, opponents can be quick to leverage those failures by spreading fear, uncertainty and doubt in state legislatures. Thanks in part to this fear of failure, legitimate or not, 20 state legislatures have passed laws restricting municipal networks.

CHOOSING AN ISP PARTNER

There are ways for municipalities to get experienced help beyond staffing up or hiring consultants. One that has worked well for some is to collaborate with existing internet service providers to deploy and manage their networks. In my experience, the following keys to success are worth keeping in mind for a community that engages with telecom companies:

- 1 Pick an experienced partner.** The key word is partner. The ISP should have a track record of working with others to achieve goals. This may mean partnering with a community, but it also could mean partnering with other business entities in related industries or even with the ISP's direct competitors. Sure, prior experience working with a municipality is a plus, but the most important thing is that the partner considers the community's goals at least as important as its own.
- 2 Remember that the partner needs to make money.** Following best practices, you'll select a vendor through a municipal procurement protocol that includes an RFP and possibly an RFI before that. Naturally, you'll want to get the best price for your constituents. Keep in mind, though, that the partnership will fail if the for-profit partner doesn't make money. Be curious about the partner's profit model, and ask how many residents will

need to sign up for the partner to be successful. Make sure you are confident of its chances of success.

- 3 Stay engaged, and don't take anything for granted.** Having an experienced partner doesn't excuse the community from being engaged and involved. In the first place, the local broadband committee and town officials need to keep tabs on things to make sure the ISP partner lives up to its end of the bargain. At the same time, don't forget that you live in your town and your ISP partner may not. The community can help promote and sell services, keep the flow of communication going and be the local eyes and ears for the partner. Sometimes we at OTELCO grumble about the level of debate we have with community partners about a simple marketing piece, but I'm convinced the work we do is better and more effective because of that back-and-forth.
- 4 Consider keeping your network operator and ISP separate.** A community may do this anyway if it operates an open-access network. Even if you've chosen municipal-led contracting, I would argue that it makes sense to avoid the temptation to one-stop shop and keep these services separate. Leverett, Massachusetts, chose to do this, and the strategy already helped carry it smoothly through a change of ISPs. Keeping the two parties separate makes it easier to sever ties with either the ISP or the operator if they fail to perform because you'll still have the support and expertise of one of them as you transition away from the other.

Community broadband networks are an innovative way to bring better internet access to more communities. Take the time to thoroughly explore the ISP partner's experience, business goals and ability to collaborate, and then give serious thought to a division of work that keeps all parties engaged and accountable. These actions will set the stage for a successful community broadband project. ❖

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