

# Broadband From the Ground Up

Community broadband projects often succeed only because local champions work for years to educate their neighbors about, and generate enthusiasm for, high-quality broadband.

By Katie Kienbaum / *Institute for Local Self-Reliance*

**A**cross the United States, grassroots advocates have been instrumental in developing community-owned networks. The three efforts described here harnessed the power of public outreach to improve communities' connectivity and quality of life.

## BROADBAND ADVOCACY BREWS IN FORT COLLINS

In 2017, the citizens of Fort Collins, Colorado, voted on a ballot measure to allow the city of 165,000 to provide fiber optic internet access as a municipal utility. To support the ballot initiative, advocates organized public outreach, including events at local breweries called Broadband and Beers. These brought together residents, elected officials and city staff to talk about improving local internet access.

These municipal broadband activists faced stiff competition from incumbent providers. A group backed by incumbents CenturyLink and Comcast as well as the Chamber of Commerce spent nearly \$1 million opposing the municipal network, issuing flyers and ads that mischaracterized the ballot measure. For instance, one flyer quoted an editorial by the Coloradoan, a local Fort Collins newspaper, in a manner that the newspaper's editorial board called "way out of context."

In comparison, the grassroots groups had a budget of only \$15,000. They focused most of their efforts on social media outreach, and they emphasized voter engagement. Colin Garfield, founder of Broadband and Beers, described the difference between the two campaigns:

"We ended up getting [about] 550 people who liked the [Facebook] page. We had thousands of comments by the end of the campaign. ... The opposition group had a Facebook page that was locked down. You couldn't join it, you couldn't comment. Their YouTube page was locked down. You couldn't even talk to them."

Despite the community organizers' much smaller pocketbooks, the ballot measure passed with 57 percent of the vote. Fort Collins is in the process of developing a citywide, publicly owned fiber network, thanks to the hard work of some very dedicated broadband advocates – plus a pint or two.

## PORTLANDERS STEP UP TO BRIDGE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Grassroots activists in Portland, Oregon, formed Municipal Broadband PDX to promote the creation of a municipal broadband network in the city. The group has already experienced success: In May 2018, the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners approved \$150,000 for a feasibility study for a municipal broadband network.

Municipal Broadband PDX focuses on issues such as affordability, equity and net neutrality to get community members excited about the potential of a publicly owned network. The group hopes a municipal network will be able to address the digital divide, which particularly impacts low-income Portlanders and people of color. Its website, [municipalbroadbandpdx.org](http://municipalbroadbandpdx.org),

suggests ways for supporters to take action, such as signing a petition or contacting local officials. Perhaps the most creative aspect of its campaign is a campy action video pinned to the top of its @PublicNetPDX Twitter account. It features many Portland icons and makes some clever jokes using internet memes and telecom references.

### GRASSROOTS FUNDING IN VERMONT

“Vermonters have a history of self-reliance,” points out the website for the East Central Vermont Community Fiber Optic Network (ECFiber). In 2008, this heritage led 24 towns in rural Vermont to join forces and build a fiber-to-the-premises network that will eventually connect every home and business in the region.

To finance the network deployment, ECFiber’s member towns turned to the people who had the most to gain from a new network – their citizens.

ECFiber issued tax-exempt promissory notes to local investors in amounts as small as \$2,500. The network was constructed in segments, prioritizing neighborhoods with the highest levels of preregistration. ECFiber eventually transitioned to more traditional funding sources, but it used the original community financing model to raise more than \$7 million and connect more than 1,000 subscribers.

“We are embedded in the community,” explained Leslie Nulty, a former project coordinator for ECFiber. “We don’t even have to have a marketing budget because people already know our brand; they know who we are.”

ECFiber anticipates connecting all premises in its service territory by 2020, and it is already having an impact elsewhere in the state: Thirteen towns in central Vermont are working to create a communications union district with the aim of deploying a fiber network similar to ECFiber.

### TAKEAWAYS FOR BROADBAND ADVOCATES

It’s important for community activists to accept that building a community broadband network doesn’t happen overnight and won’t happen merely because it could be a good idea.

Activating community members and persuading elected officials to act takes time, and setbacks can come in many forms. “It takes months, if not years, to really make progress,” explained Colin Garfield of Broadband and Beers. “It takes incredible patience.”

These examples demonstrate, however, that it’s possible for communities of different types – large and small, rural and urban – to use grassroots tactics to get the connectivity they need. ❖

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