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Broadband Is Bipartisan

In communities throughout the United States, people of all political persuasions know their economic vitality and quality of life depend on access to robust broadband.

Over the last decade, there's been a sea change in the way communities think about broadband. Ten years ago, cities that took proactive roles in obtaining broadband were not unknown, but they were out of the mainstream. Much has happened since then to bring broadband to the attention of municipal leaders: the success of several high-profile municipal broadband systems, the rise and fall of Google Fiber, the activities of Gig.U and US Ignite, the appearance of smart-cities technology, and above all, the growth of the digital divide.

Today, it's fair to say that most municipalities, from the largest to the smallest, consider broadband part of their mandate. That doesn't mean most cities, or even many cities, are considering building municipal networks. It does mean municipal leaders take seriously their residents' and businesses' needs for high-quality broadband and try to respond to those needs in whatever way is practical. At **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES'** recent economic development conference, an RUS official referred to broadband as "the only bipartisan issue."

Our Fiberville.com database shows 231 municipal and public-private fiber networks in the United States, up from 216 a year ago. But this doesn't begin to reflect the extent of municipal involvement in broadband. Among other initiatives, towns are seeking out private providers and helping them finance networks, offering the use of local assets, leasing their conduit and dark fiber, equipping low-income housing projects with broadband, and incorporating broadband into their long-term plans.

In addition, local communities are acting through cooperatives and other nonprofits to build networks and bridge the digital divide. In particular, electric cooperatives, encouraged by their members, have shown great interest in broadband in the last few years. Perhaps a quarter of the electric cooperatives in the United States are now investigating, planning or building fiber networks.

THE BIG PICTURE

For this issue of **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES**, the Institute for Local Self-Reliance guest edited a special section on community broadband. Drawing from its considerable archive of case studies and podcasts, the ILSR provides four profiles of towns that have taken varied approaches to building municipal networks. In addition, it presents stories about public-public partnerships, FTTH projects by electric and telephone cooperatives, grassroots broadband activism, local efforts to address the digital divide and state legislation supporting community broadband. There's also a sneak preview of Next Century Cities' forthcoming toolkit on best practices for community connectivity.

We hope this tour through the world of community broadband will help municipalities looking to improve broadband for residents as well as private companies and nonprofits dedicated to serving the underserved. ❖

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