

Lyndon Township Puts Skin in the Game

Community leaders often assume broadband projects that require local tax increases will never fly. The case of Lyndon Township, Michigan, shows that's not always true.

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

L yndon Township, Michigan, is like many other small towns trying to improve connectivity – it doesn't have stockpiles of cash available to fund new infrastructure. However, unlike other communities, Lyndon decided to increase property taxes to finance a publicly owned fiber network and bring high-quality internet access to every household. Local governments rarely use any form of property or other tax financing for broadband networks, but a successful ballot initiative proved that the residents of Lyndon considered an investment in modern infrastructure worthwhile.

Lyndon Township, with a population of 2,800, is tucked into the rolling hills and glacial lakes of Washtenaw County in southeastern Michigan. The state owns just over half of Lyndon's 36-square-mile territory, and the rural area offers many opportunities for recreational activities.

A half-hour drive from Lyndon Township lies Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan. Despite the town's being within commuting distance of a world-renowned

research institution, approximately 80 percent of Lyndon residents don't have access to broadband. "Our friends from Ann Arbor find it unbelievable that at our house it takes many hours – overnight, actually – to simply update our Windows operating system," explained one township resident.

For many households, satellite providers are the only options, and family members must travel to the public library in a nearby town to get online for work or school. "We started out using the words 'underserved population,'" said Gary Munce, a community member active in the broadband effort, "but really . . . 'underprivileged' is the right word."

Lyndon Township wasn't set on providing its own connectivity from the start. "We don't particularly want to build a network in our township," township supervisor Marc Keezer told Michigan Radio. "We would rather it be privatized and be like everybody else. But that's not a reality for us here." Keezer reached out to existing internet access providers, asking them to invest in the community. No providers were interested, likely because they viewed the sparsely populated area as a poor financial prospect.

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In March 2016, the township board voted unanimously to conduct a feasibility study to learn more about the pros and cons of building

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Lyndon Township began putting conduit in the ground in fall 2018.



Lyndon Township Hall. The township's hilly, forested terrain precluded wireless internet as an option for the municipal network.

a publicly owned network. The study recommended a wireline fiber optic network. Lyndon had considered fixed wireless solutions, but the township's dense forests and hilly terrain – the very qualities that attracted many residents in the first place – impede wireless signals, making the technology a poor fit. “It would really just be a Band-Aid in terms of [not being] able to scale into the future,” Keezer explained, “so for solving the problem in the long term, fiber optic was what we ended up choosing.”

In a survey the township sent out with property tax bills that summer, 83 percent of respondents who were registered voters said that having high-quality connectivity was “important” or “very important.”

Lyndon Township proposed paying for network construction by issuing a \$7 million general obligation bond, funded by a 2.9 millage increase over 20 years. Essentially, the plan would raise property taxes by approximately

\$2.91 for every \$1,000 of taxable property value. The township estimated an average yearly tax increase of \$263 for homeowners. In August 2017, voters approved the bond issuance and millage increase in a ballot initiative, with two-thirds of all voters supporting the bond proposal. Voter turnout was 43 percent, setting the record for a non-general election.

Though Lyndon Township will own the fiber network, it will partner with Midwest Energy and Communications (MEC), a nearby cooperative, to offer internet access. MEC currently provides electricity and broadband services in Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. As a cooperative, MEC shares a concern for the community with the Lyndon government, and its services will allow the small township to avoid overstretching its capacity.

The township board approved prices for the new network in August 2018, setting the monthly rate for

symmetrical gigabit speeds at an affordable \$69.95 per month. Lyndon residents will also be able to subscribe to 25 Mbps symmetrical for \$34.95 per month or 100 Mbps symmetrical for \$44.95 per month. Phone service will be available as well. Connection to the network is free for residents before April 30, 2019.

Construction work on Lyndon's new fiber network began in late October 2018, and the township anticipates that the main portion of the network will be completed by the end of 2019. Once the network is completed, Lyndon Township will offer proof that even a town with a lower population than some high schools is able to bring affordable, reliable, high-quality connectivity to all its citizens. ❖

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