

Tools and Best Practices For Community Connectivity

Communities can follow these guidelines to assess their broadband needs, encourage public support for broadband, simplify their permitting practices and more.

By Next Century Cities

*The following is an excerpt from Next Century Cities' forthcoming **Toolkit for Next Century Communities**, which will be available in January at NextCenturyCities.org.*

Every community is unique in its connectivity needs and goals. There are certain practices and policies, however, that every community can adopt to help it create a local environment rich in broadband resources. Next Century Cities' upcoming toolkit is a first-stop resource for any community that seeks to improve access to broadband, facilitate 5G deployment and ensure that all are connected.

Often, local communities don't realize the abundant resources they possess – physical assets and human capital – that they can use to advance connectivity for institutions, businesses and residents. For example, local communities can prepare for deployment at any stage by adopting dig-once policies, passing ordinances that require developers to install conduit for future deployment and maintaining up-to-date, accurate mapping of resources. Cities and counties that have embraced these policies include Brentwood, California; Mount Vernon, Washington; and Dakota County, Minnesota.

As local governments adopt policies for better connectivity, technology continues to evolve. New 5G technology now demands proactive work from communities to foster leadership, increase community engagement and simplify permitting and leasing practices.

IDENTIFY COMMUNITY NEEDS AND GOALS

A long list of local elected officials, administrators and economic development professionals can attest to the fact that an initiative to bring better internet access to a local community isn't a quick or easy process. A patient, strategic approach begins by diagnosing specific problems that a community wants to solve with high-quality internet access. Creating specific goals that align with a vision for the community ensures that true needs will be addressed.

Rather than basing decisions on assumptions they have about the needs of local residents, local leaders need to put trust in the communities and learn actual needs from those residents. The “build with, not for” principle puts the people of the community at the center of the initiative. This philosophy puts community residents first and strives to meet the *actual* needs of residents, as opposed to the needs that

leaders assume exist. To successfully “build with,” leaders must build trust in the communities that they aim to serve.

GROW SUPPORT FROM LOCAL ROOTS

Whether a community envisions a municipal network or seeks to attract private-sector investment to improve local connectivity, bottom-up support is crucial. If people in the community are informed, asked to weigh in and encouraged to participate in the community discussion, they're more likely to be engaged in the process. Transparency in the form of open meetings, casual events, and access to information helps keep the public interested and involved in the community's decisions moving forward.

The forthcoming toolkit dives deep into the factors that drive civic engagement in broadband initiatives. One of the many resources available in the toolkit is a checklist with suggestions for ways to grow local involvement. These include the following:

- Use the convening power of the city, town or county to bring together stakeholder groups for conversation, information sharing and brainstorming.
- Consider the anchor institutions, community groups and local businesses that could help involve residents in a discussion about broadband.
- Identify individuals who are trusted members of their community (faith-based leaders, activists, nonprofit staff, etc.). Seek their advice and keep them well informed about the process and progress.
- Brainstorm methods of communication that make sense for your municipality and your community (for example, an email newsletter, a Facebook page, mailings, etc.).
- Create a communications plan that is consistent, transparent and inclusive.

In Fort Collins, Colorado, local advocates for publicly owned broadband infrastructure found that combining informational meetings with the city's craft beer culture helped engage and educate locals. The Broadband and Beers meetings gave birth to local support that overcame intense

opposition from incumbent Comcast in a local referendum.

As Diana Nucera of Detroit's Equitable Internet Initiative (EII) points out in episode 323 of the Community Broadband Bits podcast, she and her colleagues who lead the program are technically savvy, but some of the most important skills they offer involve community organizing.

"...[T]he one thing that we've learned that kind of goes across the board is this idea of ensuring that community organizing is a large part of building infrastructure, and it's not just based in tech or tech heads, and that there needs to be a diversity of people at the table to build these systems."

The project, which aims to connect lower-income neighborhoods left behind by big ISPs, partners with a range of stakeholders, including faith-based and community-focused organizations.

The small, rural town of Leverett, Massachusetts, decided to fund and deploy a publicly owned network by imposing a modest property tax increase. To keep the public engaged and informed, it held many public informational meetings where residents could ask questions, comment, and share their own research. To be ultra-transparent and provide ample opportunity for public feedback, Leverett elected officials decided to hold meetings every week as the community considered funding the project.

SIMPLIFY PERMITTING AND LEASING PRACTICES

Complex permitting processes can be a roadblock to broadband investment. Confusing bureaucratic application systems and unpredictable waiting periods for approvals can discourage vendors and slow down investment. Communities that simplify and streamline this process provide vendors with the predictability that encourages investment. As vendors seek to deploy an increasing number of small cells in local communities, this preparation is especially important. Next-generation networks will require many small cells

for every one macro cell tower relied upon by current fixed wireless and mobile networks, and cities across the United States are already grappling with an influx of permits.

Creating a set of pre-approved small cell designs can expedite the approval and deployment process. The city of Huntington Beach, California, worked with providers to create four pre-approved designs for small cells. The city's sustainability manager, Antonia Graham, describes the benefit:

"These designs are now integrated into our permitting process, so if carriers' deployments fit one of the four standards, they are free to follow a streamlined, over-the-counter application process to receive permits from the city. As we developed these design standards, we had a few carriers push back with their own ideas, and we actually ended up incorporating their designs into our permitting process. Collaborating with carriers to develop these designs was integral to ensuring that the permitting process would work for not only the city but the providers as well."

The city of Riverside, California, created a "one-stop permitting shop" to address complaints about its disorganized and confusing permit application process. The shop, located on one floor of City Hall, brings together representatives from all seven departments involved in city

permitting, and a triage process ensures that applicants know exactly what steps they must take to apply for their permits. The shop uses customer data to ensure the process is as smooth and pain-free as possible.

Lincoln, Nebraska, simplified the permitting process by breaking department molds and grouping together all city staff that work on locating utilities in the city rights-of-way. This method made communication easier among staff and cut a clearer path forward for wireless providers.

Creating clear practices that simplify access to municipal assets also encourages investment and facilitates collaboration with partners. The city of Saint Louis Park, Minnesota, created a template lease agreement for leasing out its fiber assets. The template includes lease rates determined through a fiber study conducted by CTC Technology & Energy. The template agreement provides structure so that the city won't be caught flat-footed when approached by parties hoping to use its assets. The template is also flexible, allowing modifications to accommodate specific needs. Find the city's template lease agreement at <https://tinyurl.com/y7ucdv6o>. ❖

Next Century Cities, a nonprofit organization, supports mayors and community leaders as they seek to ensure that everyone has fast, affordable and reliable internet access. Next Century Cities' upcoming toolkit was sponsored by Neighborly and the Internet Society (ISOC).

FACILITATING 5G WIRELESS ROLLOUT

As the conversation around 5G gains traction nationally, municipalities face increased pressure from wireless providers to deploy small cells. Additionally, state legislation and FCC actions have severely limited local control over small-cell installation. Communities of all shapes and sizes will benefit from proactively defining aesthetic standards, streamlining their permitting practices and simplifying leasing agreements. Clarity and communication will lead to the most mutually beneficial 5G partnerships. Find action steps that your community can take to facilitate rollout in Next Century Cities' guide to the FCC Order and in the upcoming toolkit.