Building a Community Vision

The technology challenge for a rural community is closing the gap between the digital infrastructure that is profitable for commercial providers but serves only part of the community and the infrastructure necessary to serve all community members. Local leaders, driven by a clear, aspirational vision of their community's future, can proactively address this gap.

By Michael Curri / *Strategic Networks Group*

Communities face many challenges. That is nothing new. However, the increasing breadth of the challenges and the accelerating pace of change are new. These stresses put more and more demands on community leaders to lead and keep pace in an ever-changing world, often with limited or decreasing budgets. Standing still will not solve these problems, yet a vision for moving forward is not a given, and developing one is no simple task.

Adapting to and embracing change requires a vision of the future to overcome inertia. Change will happen, either on your terms or on others' terms. This is especially true of changes in technology and, in particular, broadband, which is essential digital infrastructure for any community.

Like many cities today, Sanford, Florida, frequently receives requests from multiple service providers for access to rights-of-way and pole attachments for small-cell deployments. Dealing with such requests piecemeal places additional demands on municipal resources and is potentially disruptive. Worse, it forces officials to make decisions without the context of a broader strategy and vision.

In the absence of a vision for a community's digital infrastructure, technology choices will be imposed by residents' demands and commercial pressures from service providers. This can result in an uncoordinated patchwork of solutions that the community must react to at an accelerating pace rather than an integrated platform of solutions that places the community in control of its future. It is up to local leaders to create a clear, aspirational vision for their community's future.

To help the city address these concerns, Strategic Networks Group and its engineering partner, Neel-Schaffer, reached out to Sanford's planning director, Russ Gibson, who is now considering workshops with the city's planning, permitting, and engineering groups about small cells, wireless technologies, and broadband and the FCC's recent actions on these subjects. The goal of the workshops is to provide city leaders and staff with a better understanding of where these technologies and policies are headed, how new technologies can benefit the city's businesses and residents, and how to mitigate any negative impacts to the community.

The city is also implementing a new permitting system to streamline the application and review process for any site development. Through these actions, Sanford is taking the first steps toward developing a vision that ensures its digital future.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF A VISION

Each community needs to develop a set of guiding principles for its approach to

technology. These principles must be suited to the local political, legal, economic and cultural environment. For example, a city's vision might include the following components:

1. **Technology as an enabler for addressing needs**
   A community's vision for technology should be founded on its sustainable development goals. Are these economic development opportunities, new ways of working together, improved access to educational opportunities or health care or other goals? Every community has its own priorities to meet current and expected needs. With clear goals and an aspirational vision, local leadership can identify the community's specific needs and the opportunities for technology to meet them. Technology solutions should look to the future and be assessed on their economic feasibility – that is, whether community benefits, which include municipal cost reductions, quality of service improvements and so forth, outweigh costs.

2. **Digital infrastructure as a platform for the entire community**
   However it is implemented (built, financed, leased), digital infrastructure should be designed as a platform for the community – one that is integrated and uses or enables a mix of technologies. The platform becomes a basis for the community to enable services and applications for everyone.

   Disparate service providers may request or demand permits and overbuilds on a piecemeal, ad hoc basis. Communities can avoid this problem by inviting providers to use digital infrastructure in which they do not have to invest, that has greater capacity than they would invest in and that reaches more households and businesses than they could afford to connect. Communities build and maintain roads because, although they are essential infrastructure for everyone, there is no business case for the private sector to build them. Digital infrastructure may be viewed in the same way if communities factor in economic impacts, community benefits and smart community services.

A community's vision for technology should be founded on its sustainable development goals. These may include economic development, new ways of working together, improved access to education or health care and other goals.

3. **Community ownership along with partnerships and collaboration**
   Community ownership of digital infrastructure enables leadership to better ensure that all community members have affordable, robust internet access and to manage municipal telecommunications and internet costs. Like road networks, digital infrastructure should be an enabling platform designed to be inclusive and adapt to evolving needs. Local investment in infrastructure lowers the barriers for service and content providers to bring their value to the community on a partnership or collaborative basis. Taking ownership of the digital future is a hard, complicated, long-term process – but necessary if a community is to be competitive and stay relevant in an increasingly online economy.

4. **Flexibility and scalability to meet changing needs and priorities**
   Community needs and technological change can never be fully predicted, and the pace of change will only accelerate over time. A digital infrastructure platform must be flexible enough to meet the right needs at the right time and open to technological advancement, and it must be able to scale to those needs when required.

5. **Competition and innovation**
   Through an open approach, with the community platform as an enabling infrastructure (again, like roads), a community can welcome many providers of services and content that meet their standards and requirements. This encourages healthy competition as well as a wide set of complementary services. Community members themselves have the opportunity to provide innovative solutions for the benefit of the community as a whole. Rather than simply taking whatever external providers want to offer, the community, through its own priorities and needs, determines its future.

Whether your community, like many communities, is struggling to overcome poor broadband connectivity or whether you are looking toward smart-community services in anticipation of changing needs, you need a vision for your community's future. Your vision should be based on the unique characteristics of your community, your unique challenges and your long-term goals. ❖

Michael Curri, a broadband economist, is founder and president of Strategic Networks Group, which quantifies the economic impacts of broadband and provides actionable intelligence for growth. He can be reached at mcurri@sngroup.com or 613-234-1549.