Transforming Connectivity: Oneida County's Journey to Broadband Access

Situation

In 2012, Oneida County faced significant challenges with inadequate broadband access, impacting residents and businesses alike. Recognizing the need for a dedicated entity to spearhead broadband initiatives, the county supervisors disbanded their technology committee and tasked the Oneida County Economic Development Corporation (OCEDC) with this critical role.

By 2014, OCEDC began applying for Public Service Commission (PSC) grants to improve broadband access, initially focusing on fixed wireless technology. Over the next five years, they secured 44 grants and established over 30 fixed wireless towers, serving approximately 1,200 customers who had no other options.

Response

As the limitations of fixed wireless technology became apparent, OCEDC shifted its strategy towards creating a robust public-private partnership to enhance broadband infrastructure. This partnership involved OCEDC, Oneida County supervisors, and Bug Tussel, an Internet Service Provider (ISP).

The innovative model included forward funding three years of build-out, allowing ISPs to gain subscriptions and subsequently pay for the infrastructure over 27 years through these subscriptions. To keep interest rates low, the counties guaranteed bonds, resulting in $260 million in approved county bonds across 15 counties. The project also received a $2.7 million PSC grant and additional funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Outcomes:

- Approval of a $28 million infrastructure project in fall 2023, despite a two-year delay.
- Construction of 225 miles of open middle-mile fiber backbone, accessible to any ISP.
- Final mile fiber hookups along the route, potentially serving 6,000 to 10,000 residents.
- Installation of six additional 300-foot cell towers to fill coverage gaps.
- Provision of county-owned fiber to all township facilities and throughout the middle-mile network.

Lessons Learned:

- **Persistence is Key:** Public-private partnerships are challenging and require persistence. Despite numerous setbacks, the team remained non-emotional and continued to push forward. The project faced significant delays, including a two-year wait for approval, which resulted in lost construction time and less favorable interest rates.
- **Adaptability:** The project evolved with changing circumstances, such as the introduction of the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program, which allows for final mile hookups. The team continuously scanned the landscape for new opportunities and adapted their plans accordingly.
- **Collaboration:** Successful partnerships, like the one with Bug Tussel, were crucial. However, gaining approval from multiple stakeholders required significant education and consensus-building. The process involved convincing 17 to 21 individual opinions to align, highlighting the importance of clear communication and trust-building.
- **Forward Planning:** The project was designed with future opportunities in mind, ensuring long-term sustainability and growth. The team anticipated the need for additional funding and infrastructure, such as the $2.7 million PSC grant and ARPA funding, to support the project's expansion.

Learn More

This case study highlights the complexities and rewards of developing broadband infrastructure through public-private partnerships, emphasizing the importance of persistence, adaptability, and collaboration.

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