



Bridging the Digital Divide: A Grassroots Approach to Broadband Expansion in Iowa County

Situation

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Iowa County UW-Madison Extension Community Development Educator recognized the need to address broadband issues in the county. With many residents working and learning from home, the educator conducted a comprehensive 13-page survey, reaching out to approximately 6,600 residents to gather data on their broadband experiences. This initiative was part of a broader effort by the county, supported by the county administrator, the county board, and partnerships with Internet service providers, to improve broadband access.

Response

A notable example of the community's efforts involved a subdivision of about 22 homes just outside Dodgeville. Residents frustrated with outdated dial-up infrastructure, sought assistance from the Extension Educator. Utilizing local connections and knowledge, the Extension Educator organized a neighborhood meeting to discuss their needs and concerns. This grassroots approach led to direct engagement with an Internet service provider's CEO, who attended subsequent meetings to explore solutions. Eventually, this led to the Internet service provider applying for a PSC grant and securing financial commitments from the town of Dodgeville and the county as matching funds for the broadband expansion grant.

Outcomes

Although the PSC grant was not approved, the community's determination did not waver. The Internet service provider committed to the project, which was estimated to cost around \$250,000. The town of Dodgeville and the county together committed about \$50,000, while the 22 homeowners agreed to a one-time fee of \$2,500 each. The Internet service provider covered the remaining costs, resulting in the installation of fiber to the home, providing residents with a high-quality broadband service of 300 Mbps symmetrical at a cost of \$59.99 for life.

Lessons Learned

- **Community Involvement is Crucial:** The project's success was due to the residents' active participation and commitment.
- **Strong Partnerships are Key:** The established relationships with the Internet service provider and the county were instrumental in overcoming challenges and securing the necessary funding.
- **Flexibility and Persistence Pay Off:** Despite the setback of the PSC grant not being approved, the community and partners remained committed to finding a solution.
- **Public-Private Partnerships are Effective:** The collaboration between the town, county, and Internet service provider demonstrated the effectiveness of public-private partnerships in addressing community needs.

This case study highlights the importance of grassroots efforts, strong partnerships, and community involvement in successfully addressing broadband challenges in rural areas.

Learn More

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