



Lakes, Land and Lightning Speed: Boulder Junction's Journey to Full-town Coverage

Situation

Nestled in the heart of Vilas County, Wisconsin, the Town of Boulder Junction is known for its 200 lakes and the fact that 86% of its land is state-owned. While this natural beauty draws visitors and part-time residents, it also presents unique challenges for infrastructure development. In 2017, a local Economic Development Committee survey revealed a clear barrier to economic growth: the lack of broadband. Not only was broadband the top concern, but five of the six most-cited challenges were directly tied to it.

Response

In early 2019, a grassroots effort began with the formation of a three-person work group of Broadband Champions. With just \$1,200 in seed money and a lot of determination, the group embarked on a journey that would span five years and over 5,000 volunteer hours.

Key steps included:

- **Self-Education:** The group immersed themselves in broadband knowledge, recognizing that in 2019, rural broadband expansion was still in its "prehistoric era."
- **Leadership Engagement:** Through private, one-on-one meetings with town board members, understanding and trust was built.
- **Community Outreach:** Eight well-attended public meetings helped inform and engage both full-time and part-time residents, leading to a shift from a small DSL upgrade to a full-scale fiber-to-the-premise (FTTP) project.
- **Community Investment:** Residents approved up to \$3.8 million in town investment, with a clear mandate: connect everyone, all at once.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** The town secured two Public Service Commission (PSC) grants totaling \$4 million and partnered with Brightspeed (formerly CenturyLink/Lumen) to implement the project.
- **Project Management:** Weekly meetings with the ISP helped build a strong working relationship and ensured project momentum.

Outcomes

- **Full-Town Coverage:** Fiber was installed to 1,346 of 1,347 broadband service locations (BSLs), delivering symmetrical gigabit speeds.
- **High Take Rate:** A 75% take rate demonstrated strong community buy-in and immediate use of the new service.
- **Future-Proof Infrastructure:** The town now has a robust, high-speed network that will serve residents for decades.
- **Regional Leadership:** Boulder Junction's success positioned it as a broadband leader in Vilas County, influencing broader regional planning.

Lessons Learned

- **Private Road Easements Are Critical:** In lake communities with part-time residents, securing easements is a complex but essential task. A structured, collaborative process is key.
- **Communication is Everything:** Transparent and consistent communication with town boards, residents, ISPs, and grant agencies like the PSC is vital to success.
- **Relationships Drive Results:** Building trust with ISPs and stakeholders takes time but pays dividends in smoother implementation.
- **Define Success Early:** For Boulder Junction, success meant not just laying fiber, but ensuring every resident had access to and was using high-speed broadband.
- **Broadband is Hard Work:** Thousands of volunteer hours and relentless persistence is necessary, but the long-term payoff is transformative.

Learn More

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