



# *Utilizing Surveys and Conversations to Make Informed Broadband Decisions in Iowa County*

## *Situation*

During the pandemic, broadband became a critical necessity as people increasingly relied on it for work, education, and communication. Recognizing this, Extension educator Barry Hottmann worked with county government partners to conduct an extensive 20-page survey that captured the input of 6600 individuals in Iowa County. The survey aimed to understand people's preferences regarding broadband services, including their willingness to pay, one-time fees for installation, and current usage patterns. This robust survey provided valuable insights into the community's broadband needs and challenges.

## *Response*

### **Building Relationships and Prioritizing Investment:**

- **Initial Conversations:** Iowa County took proactive steps by engaging in discussions with key stakeholders. Meetings with local Internet Service Providers (ISPs) were crucial. These conversations aimed to understand the ISPs' broadband expansion plans and identify areas for collaboration.
- **Relationship Development and Education:** The Iowa County Board, led by the county administrator, recognized the importance of broadband. They embraced a forward-thinking approach, realizing that broadband was not just a luxury but a necessity for their community.
- **Partnerships with ISPs:** Iowa County fostered relationships with various Internet service providers (ISPs) - MHTC, Lightspeed, and Bug Tussel all became valuable partners. Notably, one ISP's willingness to work across county lines (even though Lightspeed is not based in Iowa County) exemplified the collaborative spirit.
- **Investment in Broadband:** Iowa County understands that progress requires financial commitment. The county board's willingness to invest in broadband infrastructure played a pivotal role. Recognizing the value of broadband, they allocated resources to support expansion efforts.

### **Strategies to Attract Broadband Providers:**

- **Mapping and Data Collection:** Early on, Iowa County collaborated with the Southwest Regional Planning Commission on extensive mapping efforts. By combining data from previous broadband surveys and new survey results, they created a comprehensive map of every address in the county. This detailed mapping allowed them to identify areas where fixed wireless solutions (such as silos and water towers) could supplement fiber-to-the-home options.
- **Information Accessibility:** Providing ISPs with accurate information proved to be useful. Iowa County aims to be transparent about the true state of broadband coverage. By sharing detailed maps and survey data, they empowered ISPs to make informed decisions.

- **Financial Considerations:** Through this process, Iowa County recognized that investment was essential. Without financial support from both the county and willing ISPs, progress would be limited. The bottom line: substantial investments were necessary to move the needle and expand broadband offerings.

Iowa County's proactive approach, collaborative partnerships, and financial commitment have positioned them well to address broadband challenges and enhance connectivity for their residents.

## Outcomes

Iowa County's broadband initiatives produced meaningful outcomes and provided an opportunity for other communities to learn from their experiences.

- **County Board Investment:** Iowa County successfully secured investment from the county board to enhance broadband infrastructure. The county administrator played a pivotal role in advocating for broadband expansion. His forward-thinking and ability to gain the board's trust were instrumental in driving this investment.
- **Informed Decision-Making:** The data from the Extension survey helped the county board understand the urgent need for improved broadband services. By sharing information on gaps, preferences, and challenges, the board recognized the significance of addressing this issue promptly.
- **Relationships with ISPs:** Iowa County actively engaged with local Internet service providers (ISPs). Conversations with MHTC, LightSpeed, Bug Tussel and other providers fostered collaborative relationships. These partnerships allowed for shared goals and mutual understanding.

## Lessons Learned

1. **Prioritize Relationships:** Building strong relationships with ISPs is crucial. Rather than approaching them solely as service providers, focus on collaboration. Understand their perspectives, challenges, and long-term goals. A genuine partnership ensures alignment and commitment.
2. **Transparency and Communication:** Open communication with ISPs and community leaders is key. Regular dialogues with ISPs help identify opportunities, challenges, and areas for improvement. Transparency about broadband needs and available resources fosters trust.
3. **Investment Beyond Grants:** While grants are essential, sustained progress requires more. Consider allocating funds and/or resources to support broadband expansion. A joint investment by both the county and ISPs demonstrates commitment and encourages growth.

Iowa County's success lies in its proactive approach, data-driven advocacy, and collaborative relationships. As other counties embark on similar broadband journeys, they should prioritize relationships, communicate openly, and invest strategically to bridge the digital divide.

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## Learn More

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