



Bridging the Digital Divide: Jackson County's Broadband Journey

Situation

In May 2021, Jackson County, ranked 71st out of 72 counties in Wisconsin for broadband access, embarked on a mission to improve its connectivity. The initiative was sparked by the late County Board Chair, who recognized the urgent need for better broadband services. He brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including businesses, schools, local governments, the Ho-Chunk Nation, and broadband consultant MaryAnn Lippert.

Response

The journey began with a large community meeting, attended by 40-50 people, to identify the county's broadband needs. A core group was formed, consisting of representatives from various sectors. The group engaged with municipalities and Internet Service Providers, conducted surveys, and applied for grants. They secured bonding to finance middle-mile infrastructure, covering 167 miles, to enhance connectivity.

Outcomes

- **Community Engagement:** The initial survey achieved a 12% response rate, surpassing the goal of 10%.
- **Grant Applications:** The county had success in some grant applications, though not all, highlighting the persistence required in such initiatives.
- **Infrastructure Development:** Bonding for middle-mile infrastructure was a significant achievement, demonstrating the county's commitment to improving broadband access.
- **Collaborative Relationships:** Regular meetings with ISPs and neighboring counties fostered a healthy, reciprocal relationship, essential for ongoing progress.

Lessons Learned

- **Persistence Pays Off:** Despite setbacks in grant applications, continuous effort and resilience are crucial.
- **Community Involvement:** Engaging a diverse group of stakeholders, including the Ho-Chunk Nation and GIS staff, is vital for comprehensive planning and execution.
- **Regional Collaboration:** Learning from neighboring counties and regions can provide innovative ideas and strategies, emphasizing that broadband issues transcend county lines.
- **Accountability and Structure:** Regular meetings with clear agendas and accountability for next steps ensure sustained progress and effective project management.

Jackson County's broadband journey underscores the importance of community collaboration, persistence, and strategic planning in bridging the digital divide.

Learn More

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