



Bridging the Digital Divide in Juneau County

Situation

The Juneau County Economic Development Corporation (JCEDC) has been instrumental in addressing the digital divide in rural Wisconsin. The county faces significant obstacles in broadband deployment, including challenging topography, wetlands, and protected species. The return on investment for private companies is often insufficient, necessitating substantial government intervention. The current broadband expansion efforts are reminiscent of the rural electrification projects of the 1970s, highlighting the critical role of government support.

JCEDC became the primary advocacy body for broadband in Juneau County, emphasizing the importance of internet connectivity for economic growth and community development. The organization spearheaded efforts to gather accurate data on broadband coverage, overcoming the lack of standardized maps and leveraging planning grant dollars to support these initiatives.

Response

To tackle these challenges, JCEDC formed a Broadband Advisory Team, comprised of representatives from local ISPs, public and private sectors, school districts, and health and human services departments. This team immersed itself in learning through seminars, webinars, and collaborations with organizations like the University of Wisconsin Extension and Seven Rivers Alliance. They engaged in feasibility discussions with ISPs to gain insights into grant processes and industry requirements.

The advisory team conducted extensive data collection efforts, including speed tests and surveys, to map broadband coverage and identify underserved areas. They discovered that the county had more ISPs than initially thought, highlighting the potential for competitive service offerings. The team also navigated the complexities of government funding and ISP commitments to ensure sustainable broadband expansion.

Outcomes

- **Improved Data Collection:** JCEDC successfully gathered comprehensive data on broadband coverage, addressing the initial challenge of inconsistent mapping.
- **Government Support:** Significant government intervention facilitated the expansion of broadband infrastructure, akin to historical rural electrification efforts.
- **Community Adaptation:** The Mauston school district creatively adapted to COVID-19 shutdowns by becoming a licensed childcare facility, allowing students to study remotely within the school building.
- **Broadband Expansion:** By June 2024, approximately 50% of Juneau County was served at the minimum speed of 100 Mbps down and 20 Mbps up. Commitments from ISPs indicated an additional 30% coverage, providing hope for further expansion.
- **Increased Internet Service Provider (ISP) Presence:** The discovery of more ISPs than initially thought highlighted the potential for competitive service offerings and better coverage.

Lessons Learned

- **Importance of Accurate Data:** Reliable data is crucial for effective advocacy and planning in broadband expansion projects.
- **Government Role:** Substantial government support is essential in overcoming the financial barriers faced by private companies in rural broadband deployment.
- **Community Creativity:** Innovative solutions, such as the Mauston school district's adaptation, can address immediate challenges and provide long-term benefits.
- **Collaborative Efforts:** Forming a diverse advisory team and engaging in continuous learning and collaboration are key to navigating complex broadband deployment challenges.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Careful selection of partners for grant applications ensures alignment with community needs and maximizes the impact of state and federal funding.

Learn More

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