



From Dead Zone to Digital Dreams: A Tribal Community's Broadband Breakthrough

Situation

In the rural Lac du Flambeau Tribal Community spanning 86,000 acres, broadband access was unreliable, slow, and unevenly distributed. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, residents—both tribal and non-tribal—struggled with poor internet connectivity, with many not meeting even the minimum federal broadband standards. The primary provider offered limited service, and alternative options like satellite or wireless were inconsistent and insufficient. The pandemic exacerbated these challenges, forcing residents and professionals to work and learn from home under suboptimal conditions.

Recognizing the critical need for improved digital infrastructure, a grassroots coalition known as the Lac du Flambeau Broadband Team emerged. This group included tribal representatives from the IT department, health and planning officials, grants administration, Business Development Corporation, and Extension. Non-tribal representatives included the Villas County Economic Development Corporation and Extension Specialists. Their mission: to explore viable broadband solutions for the entire community.

Response

The team began by scanning the broadband landscape—hosting Zoom meetings (often from basements with poor connections), engaging with seven internet service providers to explore options to improve service and available funding opportunities. Initial excitement around partnerships faded as providers became unresponsive or backed out. Meanwhile, the community was awarded a small portion of the 2.5 GHz spectrum by the FCC, sparking interest in wireless solutions.

When the NTIA (National Telecommunications and Information Administration) opened the Tribal Broadband Grant program in 2021, the Lac du Flambeau Team began developing a wireless solution with educational entities from Wisconsin and Michigan. Two weeks before the application deadline, the partnership collapsed, and the Lac du Flambeau team needed to pivot. It was at this time the tribe made the pivotal decision to lead the project themselves, exercising their sovereignty to ensure long-term sustainability and independence from external providers. With no engineering plans or cost estimates, they decided to pursue a bold new strategy: establish their own telecommunications company to provide fiber-to-the-home. Partnering with WIN Technologies and leveraging community resolve, they worked tirelessly—often late into the night—to assemble a competitive NTIA Tribal Grant application. Despite the odds, the application was submitted on time.

Outcomes

Lac du Flambeau's determination and willingness to pivot has produced many positive outcomes for the community and has provided a unique opportunity for them to share their knowledge and experience with other tribal communities.

- **Grant Awarded:** After a thirteen-month waiting period, a 25.6-million-dollar NTIA grant was successfully awarded, validating the team's vision and hard work. The grant was to lay 122 miles of fiber to the home, and 38 miles of back haul fiber serving up to 2300 homes, 25 businesses and 19 anchor institutions.
- **Community-Led Infrastructure:** The tribe is committed to owning and operating the broadband infrastructure, ensuring local control and accountability.

- **Improved Digital Opportunity:** The project laid the groundwork for equitable, high-speed internet access across the reservation.
- **Strengthened Partnerships:** Relationships with technical partners like One Technologies and federal agencies were solidified.

Lessons Learned

1. **Stay the Course:** Persistence and focus are critical. Even when partners backed out and timelines were tight, the team remained committed to their goal.
2. **Local Leadership Matters:** The decision for the tribe to lead the project ensured alignment with community values and long-term sustainability.
3. **Ask for Help:** Leveraging external expertise and not being afraid to ask questions helped the team navigate complex technical and bureaucratic challenges.
4. **Expect Bumps in the Road:** The process was far from smooth, but resilience and adaptability turned obstacles into opportunities.
5. **Build the Right Team:** A mix of visionaries, planners, and doers created a dynamic group capable of overcoming setbacks and seizing opportunities.

Learn More

Brian Gauthier
Community Development Extension Educator, Lac du Flambeau Tribe
Brian.gauthier@wisc.edu
(715) 588-4251