



Bridging the Divide: How Marathon County Built Broadband Through Persistence and Partnership

Situation

In 2008, Marathon County, Wisconsin, recognized a growing digital divide between its urban and rural communities. A broadband gap analysis revealed significant disparities in access and reliability, exacerbated by the region's challenging topography. Despite early efforts, including a 2015 broadband task force formation and policy recommendations, progress was slow. Private internet service providers (ISPs) were reluctant to invest in low-return rural areas, and state statutes limited the county's ability to build its own last-mile infrastructure.

By 2019, little had changed. A second study confirmed the persistent gaps and proposed a \$30–36 million county-built fiber and tower network which failed to gain ISP support. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, dramatically shifting the landscape. The urgent need for remote work, education, and telehealth services brought new funding opportunities and renewed momentum.

Response

Marathon County responded with a multi-pronged, adaptive strategy:

- **Task Force Formation:** A formal Broadband Task Force was established in 2020, reporting to the County Board's Infrastructure Committee. It included representatives from government, healthcare, education, business, and citizen advocates.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** The county partnered with a wide range of ISPs to pursue state and federal grants. While many applications were unsuccessful, the county remained committed to collaboration.
- **Infrastructure Investment:** In 2021, the county entered a landmark agreement with Bug Tussle to connect 16 towers, securing space and 24 strands of fiber for public use. This not only improved fixed wireless options but also significantly enhanced cell service, benefiting over half the population who rely on mobile data.
- **Mapping and Planning:** With BEAD (Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment) planning funds, the county hired a broadband coordinator and developed detailed service maps to identify priority areas. This marked a shift from relying on ISP-defined service areas to a county-led, data-informed approach.
- **Funding Flexibility:** Recognizing the limitations of ARPA timelines, the county began reallocating capital improvement funds to create a broadband investment pool. This allowed for targeted incentives in underserved areas, especially sparsely populated towns like Harrison.
- **Community Engagement:** The county has regularly engaged with local governments and the Towns Association, hosted quarterly meetings, and secured up to 70 letters of support per grant round. They also worked with businesses like Marshfield Health Systems to secure matching funds.

Outcomes

- **Improved Connectivity:** The Bug Tussle partnership enhanced both fixed wireless and mobile broadband access, especially in rural areas.

- **Strategic Targeting:** New mapping tools have enabled the county to prioritize investments in the most underserved areas.
- **Sustainable Funding:** A flexible funding model was developed to support future broadband expansion beyond ARPA deadlines.
- **Broad Support:** Strong community and stakeholder engagement bolstered grant applications and built public trust.
- **Policy Influence:** The county advocated for greater transparency in ISP infrastructure data, pushing for state-level policy changes.

Lessons Learned

- **Persistence Pays Off:** Despite early setbacks and failed grant applications, the county's long-term commitment led to meaningful progress.
- **Partnerships Are Essential:** Success depends on collaboration with ISPs, local governments, businesses, and residents.
- **Data Drives Decisions:** Investing in accurate mapping and planning tools helped the county shift from reactive to proactive broadband development.
- **Flexibility is Key:** Adapting funding strategies and timelines allowed the county to stay competitive and responsive to changing opportunities.
- **Equity Requires Intentionality:** To reach the hardest-to-serve areas, the county had to move beyond open-ended funding and strategically direct resources where they were most needed.

Learn More

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