



Bridging the Digital Divide: A Regional Approach to Broadband Expansion

Situation

In February 2023, the New North region embarked on a mission to enhance broadband access across its 18 counties. Sixteen of these counties united under a local planning grant from the Public Service Commission (PSC) to address the digital divide. The goal was to leverage the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program and other forthcoming grants to ensure widespread internet access for residents.

Response

The initiative began by appointing a Broadband Champion in each participating county. The primary objectives included collecting comprehensive broadband data at local, regional, and state levels, supporting the PSC, and collaborating with regional planning commissions (RPCs) like Bay Lake and East Central. Key actions included:

- Establishing the New North Broadband Alliance with 16 members.
- Conduct monthly office hours for continuous support and updates.
- Engaging GIS experts from both RPCs to create detailed regional maps.
- Facilitating meetings with Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to build strong partnerships.
- Developing data visualization tools to communicate broadband data effectively.

To address the challenge of identifying and correcting Broadband Service Locations (BSLs), the team utilized GIS data. For instance, in Door County, they analyzed over 23,000 BSLs using address points, building permits, and polygons to ensure accuracy. This methodology helped identify and correct mislocated BSLs, significantly reducing errors. They identified 3,814 possible BSLs that were not correctly located and eliminated about 84% of these errors through GIS analysis.

Outcomes

- Formation of a robust New North Broadband Alliance.
- Creation of a dynamic regional broadband map with over 115 data layers, continuously updated.
- Enhanced collaboration and shared best practices among counties and ISPs.
- Improved data consistency and visualization across county lines, aiding in regional planning.
- Considerable time savings in identifying and correcting BSLs using GIS analysis.
- Development of cost estimates for broadband expansion, helping counties understand the financial scope of the project.

Lessons Learned

- **Collaboration is Key:** The success of the initiative hinged on the collective efforts of counties, RPCs, and ISPs. Building strong relationships and maintaining open communication were crucial. Regular meetings and open forums allowed for the exchange of ideas and troubleshooting of issues in real-time.
- **Data Consistency Matters:** Standardizing data visualization across counties helped in making informed regional decisions. Consistent data allowed for accurate comparisons and better planning, ensuring that all stakeholders were on the same page.

- **Local Knowledge is Invaluable:** Leveraging local insights and expertise is essential in identifying gaps and addressing specific community needs. Local champions provided critical information that might not be apparent from a broader perspective, ensuring that the solutions were tailored to the unique challenges of each area.
- **Continuous Improvement:** The project emphasized the importance of ongoing updates and refinements to the broadband map and planning processes. This iterative approach allowed for the incorporation of new data and feedback, ensuring that the tools and strategies remained relevant and effective.
- **Effective Use of GIS:** Utilizing GIS for BSL identification and correction proved to be a highly effective strategy, saving time and improving accuracy. The ability to visualize data spatially helped in identifying discrepancies and planning interventions more efficiently.
- **Cost Awareness:** Developing cost estimates based on the data helped in communicating the financial requirements to county boards and stakeholders, highlighting the importance of detailed planning and analysis. Understanding the financial implications allowed for better budgeting and resource allocation.
- **Adaptability to Challenges:** The project faced several challenges, such as identifying missing or mislocated BSLs and dealing with varying data quality across counties. By developing adaptable methodologies and leveraging technology, the team overcame these obstacles and streamlined the process.
- **Importance of Detailed Planning:** Detailed planning, including considerations for local geography and infrastructure challenges like bedrock and wetlands, was crucial. This level of detail ensured that cost estimates were as accurate as possible, helping stakeholders make informed decisions.

This case study highlights the power of regional collaboration and data-driven planning in bridging the digital divide and enhancing broadband access for all.

Learn More

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