



# *Tackling the Digital Divide: Polk County's Journey to "Internet for All"*

## **Situation**

Polk County, Wisconsin, like many rural communities, faced a significant digital divide. While some areas enjoyed excellent broadband service, others were underserved or lacking access. Recognizing that equitable internet access is essential for economic development, education, and quality of life, the county set out with a bold vision of implementing "Internet for All." This meant ensuring every resident, regardless of location, had access to reliable, high-speed broadband.

## **Response**

- **Broadband Consultant:** The county engaged a seasoned broadband consultant who brought over five decades of telecommunications experience to the table.
- **Comprehensive Assessment:** The initiative began with a comprehensive assessment of broadband availability across the county.
- **Broadband Champions:** It was critical to identify broadband champions with a passion for bridging the digital divide.
- **Partnerships:** Polk County worked in partnership with the Economic Development Corporation leveraging existing relationships with broadband service providers to build momentum.
- **Broadband Forward and Telecommuter Forward:** Adopting these programs helped streamline local government processes and raised awareness about the economic importance of broadband, especially for the county's 1,365 remote workers.
- **Mapping:** This was a critical component of the strategy. The team collaborated with the PSC to develop layered maps showing broadband speeds, school district boundaries, public lands, and transportation infrastructure. These visual tools helped county leaders and stakeholders clearly identify underserved areas and prioritize them for development.

## **Outcomes**

- **Coverage Expansion:** Over 90% of Polk County now has access to broadband speeds of at least 100 Mbps download and 20 Mbps upload, with many areas upgraded to fiber.
- **Economic Development:** Enhanced broadband access supports remote work, increases property values, and attracts new residents and businesses.
- **Informed Decision-Making:** High-quality, layered maps help county supervisors and local leaders to make data-driven decisions.
- **Collaborative Momentum:** Strong partnerships between local government, service providers, and the Wisconsin Broadband Office have created a unified front for broadband expansion.

## **Lessons Learned**

- **Start with a Clear Vision:** “Internet for All” became a rallying cry that unified stakeholders and guided decision-making.
- **Leverage Existing Programs:** State-level initiatives like *Broadband Forward* and *Telecommuter Forward* establish legitimacy to local efforts.
- **Data Tells the Story:** Visual mapping tools can help convert complex broadband data into usable information for non-technical audiences.
- **Economic Framing Matters:** Emphasizing the economic benefits of broadband, i.e., increased property values and remote work opportunities helps build public and political support.
- **Partnerships Are Key:** Success relies on collaboration between government entities, service providers, and community leaders.

### ***Learn More***

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