



Navigating Broadband Expansion in Sauk County

Situation

Sauk County faced a new challenge when broadband expansion unexpectedly became a priority. Initially, broadband was not on the county's radar, but the need for improved internet access became apparent. The Economic Development Director had no prior experience with broadband and had to pivot quickly to understand its importance and implications for the county.

Response

To address this issue, the Economic Development Director and Sauk County took several steps:

1. **Learning and Understanding:** The Economic Development Director educated herself about broadband and its significance. She collaborated with regional economic development organizations and experts to gain knowledge.
2. **Community Engagement:** The Economic Development Director attended town meetings to discuss broadband and its benefits, emphasizing the importance of speed testing.
3. **Collaboration:** The Economic Development Director worked closely with the GIS team and other knowledgeable individuals to develop a comprehensive approach to broadband expansion.
4. **Budget Allocation:** Even before fully understanding the scope, county budget dollars were allocated to ensure readiness for broadband initiatives.

Outcomes

These efforts led to several positive outcomes for Sauk County:

- **Increased Awareness:** The importance of broadband was successfully communicated to the County Administration, Board Chair, and Economic Development Committee.
- **Community Involvement:** Outreach efforts resulted in greater community engagement and understanding of broadband.
- **Improved Speed Testing:** Sauk County saw an increase in speed testing rates, addressing one of the initial challenges.
- **Collaborative Efforts:** strong partnerships with neighboring counties and local ISPs, particularly Reedsburg Utility, were established, to address topographical challenges and service gaps.

Lessons Learned

Several key lessons emerged from this initiative:

- **Importance of Collaboration:** Working with knowledgeable individuals and organizations was crucial for success. Regular meetings with Columbia County and other partners facilitated information sharing and decision-making.
- **Community Engagement:** Engaging the community and explaining the benefits of broadband is essential for gaining support. The presence at town meetings and efforts to educate the public were vital.

- **Adaptability:** The ability to quickly learn and adapt to new responsibilities was vital in navigating broadband expansion. It was vital to meet early, meet often, and gather comprehensive information.
- **Proactive Planning:** Allocating budget resources early and being prepared for future needs ensured that Sauk County is ready to move forward with broadband initiatives.

This case study highlights the importance of collaboration, community engagement, adaptability, and proactive planning in addressing unexpected challenges in economic development. The Economic Development Coordinator was pivotal in driving these efforts forward, making the process approachable and effective.

Learn More

Melanie Platt-Gibson

Sauk County

Director of Economic Development

melanie.plattgibson@saukcountywi.gov