



Taylor County's Bold Broadband Approach: Building Infrastructure First

Situation

In a 2019 statewide broadband access ranking, Taylor County landed at a dismal 71st out of 72 counties. Residents were frustrated with poor service, and the digital divide was stifling access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. The county lacked a roadmap, resources, and reliable infrastructure. What it did have was a Broadband Champion serving on the county board with a background in IT and a vision for change.

Response

The journey began with a simple but powerful act: listening. A county-wide survey revealed overwhelming dissatisfaction with broadband service and strong public support (72%) for government intervention. This catalyzed the formation of a broadband committee, which studied successful and failed models from across the Midwest.

Taylor County chose a bold, infrastructure-first approach:

- **Middle-Mile Network:** The county borrowed \$9.5 million (approved unanimously three times) to build a 73-mile middle-mile fiber network through a partnership with Kansas-based Wayne Rec.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Anchor Institutions such as schools, town halls, and public facilities have received free high-speed internet guaranteed for 20 years.
- **Revenue Sharing:** The county receives 11.5% of gross revenue from any customer using the network, including dark fiber leases.
- **Futureproofing:** A clause in the contract allows the county to buy back the network for \$1 after 20 years.
- **Private Sector Competition:** The presence of the county network spurred ISPs to begin building fiber to the home—something they had not done before.
- **Eastern Expansion:** A no-cost partnership with a private internet service provider extended fiber coverage to the eastern part of the county, creating a full ring of connectivity.

Outcomes

- **Cost Savings:** The county now saves \$30,000/month by utilizing its own fiber network.
- **Public Access:** All public and private schools, and most municipal buildings, now have a 2-gig service.
- **Revenue Generation:** The county is generating revenue from fiber leases and lending its borrowing capacity to private ISPs.
- **Market Activation:** Competition from private ISPs has increased, accelerating broadband expansion.
- **Asset Growth:** The county has already received an \$11 million offer for the network it built for \$8.4 million.

Lessons Learned

- **Community Buy-In is Critical:** The initial survey and public support gave the project legitimacy and momentum.

- **Contracts Matter:** Language like “may,” “shall,” and “pass-by” can have major implications. Legal clarity is essential.
- **Think Long-Term:** Overbuilding fiber capacity (436-strand fiber) ensures the infrastructure will not become obsolete.
- **Public-Private Synergy Works:** The county did not aim to be the sole provider—just the catalyst. The encouragement of competition brings positive results.
- **Leverage What You Have:** Lending borrowing capacity to an ISP has created value without direct expenditure.

Learn More

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