



Broadband by Committee: Building Local Capacity for Connectivity in Door County

Situation

In 2022, Door County faced a pressing need to expand broadband infrastructure across its 19 municipalities. Recognizing the opportunity presented by new federal funding programs like USDA's ReConnect and NTIA's BEAD, county leadership encouraged each municipality to form a Municipal Broadband Committee. By the end of the year, 15 of the 19 municipalities had active committees, with only two opting out.

As federal funding opportunities emerged, so did complex permitting and environmental compliance requirements. The county needed a coordinated, informed approach to navigate these challenges and support municipalities in their broadband development efforts.

Response

The University Wisconsin Extension Community Development Educator played a vital role in convening stakeholders, translating complex regulatory requirements, and building local capacity. Key actions included:

- **Formation of a County Broadband Committee:** This group included municipal representatives, utility professionals, and environmental experts. It served as a hub for information sharing and strategy development.
- **Environmental Compliance Planning:** With guidance from a specialist in the county's Soil and Water Department, the county applied for a Section 7 review from U.S. Fish and Wildlife to preemptively address endangered species concerns. Although denied due to the county not being the deploying entity, the process built valuable relationships and documentation.
- **Permitting and Right-of-Way Coordination:** The educator led a subcommittee to review and adapt the Wisconsin Utility Accommodation Policy into a simplified, municipality-friendly ordinance and permit application. This ensured consistency from state to local levels and helped municipalities prepare for broadband construction.
- **Resource Compilation:** Environmental and historic preservation resources were mapped and documented, including federal lands, state natural areas, and endangered species habitats. These were integrated into the county's broadband planning map and shared with ISP partners.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Regular meetings and outreach to DOT, DNR, USFWS, and local land partners ensured that all permitting, and compliance considerations were addressed proactively.

Outcomes

- **15 Municipal Broadband Committees Formed:** Demonstrating strong local buy-in and readiness.
- **Municipal Right-of-Way Ordinance Template Developed:** Based on state and county policies, this tool helps municipalities manage broadband construction responsibly.

- **Environmental Compliance Resources Centralized:** A comprehensive guide was created for municipalities and ISPs, streamlining future permitting processes.
- **Improved Interagency Relationships:** Direct contacts with agencies like US Fish and Wildlife now exist, potentially reducing future delays.
- **Increased Local Capacity:** Municipal leaders and partners are now better equipped to manage broadband projects and navigate regulatory landscapes.

Lessons Learned

- **Start Early and Think Long-Term:** Environmental reviews and permitting can take over a year. Prompt action is essential to avoid delays during the performance period of federal grants.
- **Leverage Local Expertise:** Utility professionals and retired public servants brought invaluable practical knowledge to the table.
- **Standardization Saves Time:** Aligning municipal policies with state and county standards reduces confusion and ensures smoother project implementation.
- **Relationships Matter:** Building trust and communication channels with state and federal agencies pays dividends when navigating complex regulatory processes.
- **Documentation is Key:** Having a centralized, accessible repository of environmental and permitting resources empowers municipalities and their ISP partners to act confidently and compliantly.

Learn More

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