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

Situation

In 2020, 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, Door County Economic Development, Door County, 8 municipalities, two school districts, Washington Island Electric Cooperative, Door County Medical Center, the Raibrook Foundation and Renard's Cheese invested into a Broadband Infrastructure Engineering Assessment Report.

The findings from the engineering assessment showed that Door County has significant broadband availability gaps, and the county is a story of broadband haves and have-nots. There was almost nobody in the middle. Rural broadband speeds were far below the FCC 25/3 Mbps definition of broadband at that time. The average MLab speed tests for every ISP other than Charter/Spectrum showed average broadband speeds of 6/2 Mbps. Feedback cited insufficient network infrastructure to manage high seasonal tourism demands, which would require substantial grant investment to build out this infrastructure.

The engineering assessment recommendations were: consider a collaborative effort to get better broadband, reach out to potential ISP partners, get creative in finding grants, consider a statistically valid survey, be prepared to challenge the FCC broadband maps, review local policies related to fiber construction, educate the public, lobby for larger broadband grant funding, be prepared to support grant filings, tackle broadband gaps that include affordability, skills and public availability, and hire a full-time dedicated broadband employee.

In April of 2022 Door County hired a full-time broadband coordinator to work with the county municipalities. County leadership encouraged each municipality to form a Municipal Broadband Committee, and the Door County ad-hoc Broadband Committee started their work in July of 2022. By the end of the year, 15 of the 19 municipalities had active committees, with only three opting out. One of these being the served City of Sturgeon Bay. The strategy was a federated approach to ensure fiber-to-the-premises access would be built to *all* County fire number locations.

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 Door County Broadband Coordinator Jessica Hatch, 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, economic development, healthcare, education and-experts. It served as a hub for information sharing and strategy development.

Municipal Engagement: The County Administrator sent the request to municipalities to consider establishing their own broadband ad-hoc committees in January of 2022. When Jessica came into office, there were three broadband ad-hoc committees established, in addition to Washington Island Electric Cooperative having grants in place to expand broadband access on the island. Jessica called and attended many municipal board meetings to have discussions and ask the municipalities to consider establishing their own ad-hoc committees to discuss broadband in their communities.

Best Practice for Municipal Committees: Communication, information, and resource sharing from early established municipal committees helped establish best practices, reducing the municipal resource and project cycle times. The early municipal committees served as a hub for information sharing and strategy development for the other municipal committees starting this journey

Address, email, phone etc.

WISER Survey Data Use Agreement Established: The Broadband Coordinator established a data use agreement with the PSC WBO in order to use their Wisconsin Internet Self-Report (WISER) as a statistically valid survey to measure the lived experience of residents and businesses in Door County, and to assist with decision making for municipal financial investment. This was a grassroots effort and a small paper version was created and mailed to residents and businesses throughout the County. This effort garnered a 17% response rate based on amount of County fire numbers.

GIS Broadband Planning Map: Speed-test data from the WISER survey was mapped for municipal committees' decision making. The maps layers also include: federal lands, county and state parks, municipalities, municipal boundaries, school districts, grant awards, and street center lines. The Door County GIS/Land Information Coordinator Zakry Schwartz has been recognized by the WI Land Information Association on our BSL verification work, and broadband work.

ISP Engagement: Each municipal committee went through outreach and engagement with ISPs that have network infrastructure in Door County, and additionally some that do not, that were willing to answer RFPs and engage in the process. They engaged with ISP to explore innovative solutions and partnerships aimed at expanding broadband coverage.

Grant Support: Jessica has been involved in grant support and providing survey data and information for any municipality and partner ISP writing grants for broadband deployment be it federal or state grants.

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 provided excellent resource materials for the committee that included: environmental and historic preservation along with maps including federal lands, state natural areas, and endangered species habitats. These have been integrated into the county's broadband planning map and shared with ISP partners.

Utility Accommodation and Permit: Jessica 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, as well and provide local solutions for permitting review and compliance.

Stakeholder Engagement: Outreach to DOT, DNR, USFWS, and local land partners ensured that all permitting, and compliance considerations were addressed proactively.

Broadband Serviceable Location (BSL) Verification: The Sevastopol broadband municipal committee established a BSL location verification process that was adopted by several other committees to review their local fire numbers against broadband serviceable locations (BSL) data to ensure that BSL ID locations were in fact a real location, or if that location should not qualify as a BSL and should not receive a fiber drop. This work was presented at the 2024 WI Land Information Association conference.

Regional Partnership and Planning: Due to the WI PSC WBO Broadband Local Planning Grant the NEW North Broadband Alliance was established. Jessica joined this working group to prepare for the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program funding. The group facilitated monthly meetings to exchange insights, strategies, and best practices to tackle connectivity challenges. They engaged with ISP to explore innovative solutions and partnerships aimed at expanding broadband coverage. Tools that were created included the NEW North BEAD Hub and the NEW North Broadband Guide.

Secondary Resident Study: The Broadband Committee and Door County Economic Development partnered with UW Whitewater Fiscal and Economic Research Center to measure the economic impact of broadband towards secondary residents of Door County. With more secondary homes than primary residences, Door county relies heavily on seasonal residents, many of whom report that limited broadband keeps them from staying longer.

Outcomes

15 Municipal Broadband Committees Formed: By fall of 2022 the committees were established, demonstrating strong local buy-in and readiness. This expedited infrastructure investment, construction and grant funding.

Request For Proposal (RFP): A Request for Proposal (RFP) was established and shared with all the committees to allow for cohesiveness and consistency to rate the responses from ISPs. This aided the ad-hoc committees in having an ISP partner recommendation for the municipal Boards to make a partnership decision on.

Public Private Partnerships: The ISP engagement garnered 8 successful public private partnerships to serve *all* fire numbers within those municipal boundaries. This has garnered $4.7 Million in grant funding for over 9,000 fire number

locations. There is additional BEAD BOB PRELIMINARY funding pending for another 1,770 locations as part of a public private partnership investment.

Grant Awards: Door County has been awarded a total of over $8.2 million in funding for FTTP broadband grants through 2024. There is an additional $19.9 million in funding awards as part of the BEAD BOB PRELIMINARY Final Proposal from the WI PSC WBO waiting to be approved by NTIA for an additional 5,975 locations.

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 and WI DNR now exist, potentially reducing future delays.

Regional Planning: Regional work from the WI PSC WBO Broadband Local Planning Grant became part of the WI Office of Rural Prosperity Rural Broadband Toolkit as part of the Regional and Tribal Planning module.

Measuring The Economic Impact of Broadband Towards Secondary Residents of Door County WI: The study found that with reliable fast internet, secondary homeowners would extend their stays by an average of 15 days per year – generating over $18.6 million in new annual economic impact, creating 137 additional jobs, and adding $750,000 in state and local tax revenues. Expanding broadband in Door County means stronger communities, year-round economic vitality, and better opportunities for residents, businesses and visitors.

Increased Local Capacity: Municipal leaders and partners are now better equipped to manage broadband projects and navigate regulatory landscapes. Broadband reliability is, and continues to be improved countywide through futureproof fiber expansion projects, addressing year-round demands, competition in the market, competitive prices, and lowering costs for residents and businesses.

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 local, 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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