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community

Community Broadband Challengers Want to Live in a “Gig City”

The idealistic but still-struggling community broadband “movement” — which also calls itself by such names as “municipal broadband” and “Gigabit Cities” — has received a welcome boost lately that came in two forms from Democrats in both the FCC and the White House.

Democrat Tom Wheeler as FCC Chairman has been speaking out strongly for such upstart networks, and he backed up his talk by rallying the Commission to vote 3-2 in February 2015, to overrule state regulators who had placed impediments against attempts by the cities of Chattanooga, Tenn., and Wilson, N.C., to build fiber optic networks. Such impediments exist to varying degrees in about 20 states, almost all of them drafted at the behest of cable and telephone companies. The FCC ruling signals that the current Commission can, in principal, knock down these barriers by fiat.



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The second and perhaps related support from Washington is coming from President Obama himself, who has been speaking out strongly in support of the municipal broadband concept and, more broadly, of efforts to provide faster and better Internet service to Americans. He announced the formation of a BroadbandUSA initiative, which seeks to provide technical and tactical support to municipal and rural broadband efforts, with the helping hand coming from the federal National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) as well as other government agencies.

The fact that a community broadband movement exists at all is in many cases a testament to the slowdown in technological innovation by cable and telephone broadband providers. The result has left urban dwellers with service at decent but (on a global scale) unimpressive data rates. Subscribers and would-be subscribers in small towns and rural areas have put up with data rates and quality of service that range from fair to terrible.

By the FCC's numbers, in its action to increase the definition of broadband to 25 Mbps downstream and 3 Mbps upstream, note "Americans living in rural areas and on Tribal lands disproportionately lack access to broadband." Specifically, while 25 Mbps/3 Mbps capability is unavailable to 8% of Americans living in urban areas, it is unavailable to 53% of Americans living in rural areas and 63% of Americans living on Tribal lands and in the U.S. Territories. "Thus, we also separately conclude that broadband is not being deployed in a reasonable and timely fashion because it is not yet available to the majority of rural and Tribal Americans and not becoming available quickly enough," the FCC said.

From such frustration come entrepreneurial and civic-minded challengers, and they have performed remarkable feats in many places. Perhaps the most impressive achievements have been in smaller towns where municipally owned electrical utilities or other players have managed to finance and build fiber optic networks offering impressive speeds. Some examples include the aforementioned Chattanooga and Wilson, where municipal utility companies are delivering gigabit-per-second service to businesses and homes; and such places as Red Wing, Minn.; Danville, Va.; Cedar Falls, Iowa; Lafayette, La.; Powell, Wyo.; and Russellville, Ky. In all, close to 250 cities have some kind of fiber deployments at least getting started, industry groups say.

As is characteristic of markets in transition, support has sprung up in the form of conferences, websites and other forms of information sharing among numerous nonprofits, including Next Century Cities, Gig.U, Coalition for Local Internet Choice, U.S. Ignite, and the Fiber to the Home Council.



Then there is the dramatic entry on the scene of well-heeled Google with its Google Fiber initiative, the true significance and likely success of which are still open questions. Google went all out to overbuild fiber in competition with incumbent carriers on Kansas City (K.C. and Mo.), and is rolling out aggressively in Austin, Texas, and Provo, Utah. Google has signaled its intent to deploy throughout the regions in and around four Southeastern U.S. cities: Atlanta, Ga.; Charlotte, N.C.; Nashville, Tenn.; and Raleigh-Durham, N.C. Other regions designated for possible rollout are greater Phoenix, Ariz.; Portland, Ore.; San Antonio, Texas; and San Jose, Calif.

It's hard to overstate the degree to which the reality or even the threat of a Google Fiber deployment in a given area has energized incumbent carriers. AT&T, CenturyLink, Cox, Comcast, Time Warner and others have been roused from their torpor and are moving aggressively to improve data rates and quality of service (or at least to herald their intentions in advertising and PR campaigns).

As Blair Levin of the Brookings Institution puts it: "Economic value creation, which for several millennia was based on the manipulation and distribution of physical objects, increasingly will be based on manipulating, transporting, and analyzing bits of information."

