

## Transcript From Next Century Cities Listening Session on May 2, 2022 in Houston, Texas

NCC Participants:

- Francella Ochillo, Executive Director
- Brian Donoghue, Deputy Director
- Ryan Johnston, Policy Counsel for Federal Programs
- Brittany-Rae Gregory, Communications Director
- Corian Zacher, Senior Policy Counsel

Jake Varn, Principal Associate, Pew Charitable Trusts Broadband Access Initiative

Speakers will remain anonymous, but will be identified with a number.

- Speakers 1 and 2 are broadband advocates from a nonprofit in Texas.
- Speaker 3 is a broadband advocate from a nonprofit in urban Kansas and Missouri.
- Speaker 4 is a county leader from rural Maryland.

Corian Zacher: The first thing we wanted to talk about was what the greatest connectivity barriers in everyone's community are. We know that there are challenges in every community, regardless of how many steps they've taken to get things right. There are always things that need to be improved. So, let's talk about what some of the barriers are to making that happen.

Speaker 1: Affordability and digital skills.

Speaker 2: Probably next to that is access. There may be access, but it may be so poor and unreliable that actually, people don't have access.

Speaker 3: One of the challenges with that question we hit that a lot in different mediums locally is that the needs are so different, even for different, really dramatic subsections. There are a few blocks in a business district that doesn't have access to good connectivity. It really inhibits economic development say in those two blocks, but maybe two blocks over, you can get fiber from three different providers.

So, consistency of access and how you really zero in on that needs discussion at a kind of hyperlocal micro level. Even at a household level. We all know data that is so inaccurate from Form 477 block to block within even a pretty narrow define, area. I think that's true. I mean, it's true, certainly at the infrastructure side of things. It's also true when you talk about access and affordability, and those are things that are really, you know, easily described broad topics. But what that means at a family or household level is really different in a way that is hard to make category broad policy.

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Speaker 4: I would agree. In a rural area like us, we have like three major needs and I don't know how I would categorize one as the greatest. We have some places that have no middle mile fiber. So nothing to even distribute from. We have some places within served areas that were not served. It goes down the main state road, but it doesn't go off onto the side county roads. And then we have is other places that have long driveways are one of our biggest challenges right now, if a house is more than 250 feet away from the road, then they have to pay the extra to get to their house. And a lot of times it's up to thousands and tens of thousands of dollars.

Corian Zacher: Yeah. This is all great. So, you all hit on like three big points, which is that there's like some big level policy issues, like Form 477 data, and then there's issues with providers and affordability at the household level. And then there's also, um, like these perception issues, like you were talking about people not knowing how to use the service and things like that. I think those are all really great points. And we'll probably be a good segway into the next question, which is. Did anyone want to talk about what are some solutions either to those barriers or what I know that all of you have talked about other opportunities that you've found in your own communities to tackle some of these challenges that have come up.

Speaker 1:

I think the digital navigator concept is gonna be really good because, we find out when we talk to our librarian in our libraries in small rural case, they are the defacto technology center and hub for community. And so when people come there to use internet or the computers, they're not just showing up to use the internet, they're also needing assistance to get logged on and needing assistance to set up an email. So when we've heard from nonprofits that offer services, they're having to do digital skills training to allow people to access those services. They don't feel, oftentimes, qualified. There are a lot of librarians that are older or retired. And so they are feeling a lot of pressure to not only be the resource for people to get connected, but also to help them learn to do it too. And so there needs to be not just the availability, but, and the librarians say that when people sign up for a class, they need help filling out the forms right now. Maybe help all the things that they need to do for jobs and email account, taxes, and they're expecting the librarian to be the...everything.

Speaker 4:

As far as solutions, we've been trying to tackle broadband access issues in our rural county for like 11 years. We did a public private partnership with a fixed wireless provider early on, back in 2016, I think was when the paper work started and things started flowing with that. That has had some success, but having mountains with trees that keep growing and wind that blows antennas off kilter, recently that company has been switching some of their deployments to fiber where they can and still using the fixed wireless where they can and for backhaul to these remote communities, they actually just are putting up a new one. It's

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really innovative. They're, they're sending back haul through a microwave pipe. So, it's a much bigger pipe to get it to the community and then doing fiber distribution. So that has helped in some of our remote areas that can't get.

We don't have fiber on the poles yet. We, as a county government have been applying for funding and helping our ISPs look for funding. And more recently we've done a couple pilots. We're going to getting ready to ramp up digging assistance. So, one of the most expensive things to do is dig. And we have county roads crews and department of public utilities, folks who know how to dig and have equipment to do that. So, in places where there is no way in Hades that this is gonna get done, because it's way too expensive to hire out that digging, we have come in and opened up a trench and the ISP has provided the conduit. And we actually, if it's along our right away, we ask them to provide a second conduit for our exclusive use in the future, if they ever needed. And then then the ISP has their conduit. They can run the, the lines through. So, we're just trying to tackle it any way we can.

Jake Varn: Maryland also has an additional ACP benefit on top of that. Is that you notice that's helped much with increasing signups?

Speaker 4:

I don't have any data on that. I haven't looked at that. I would assume it would because at least where we are that would pay for your entire service.

Jake Varn: Texas now, um, \$30 plus with \$30 from the state.

Speaker 1: That's creative problem-solving. That's what we tell all our stakeholders is to find ways to work with the providers. So that's great.

Corian Zacher: You also brought up the point about, um, like partnerships with, I feel like 15 or 20 years ago, transportation wasn't as involved in this. And I know some people when we asked, like what people wanted to learn from this session, some people talked about transportation collaborations. So, um, I think that might be an interesting point of topic if anyone else wanted to touch on that.

Jake Varn: It is interesting. Prior joining Pew, I worked at National Governor's Association and had transportation in my portfolio with broadband. The amount of state department of transportation that are starting to point someone as a coordinator on broadband facilities. There was a federal highway memo that came out suggesting that they do so and suggesting that they made someone within their department for that. There have been other states there's been few for about a decade now seems, but there's been a very suddenly groundswell of more state transportation departments being involved with it. They also, a lot of them have their own networks that they have connected to their traffic sensors and lights. So, they're seeing that they're not using all that capacity for partnerships to lease it out.

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Speaker 3: Yeah. It's weird. I think traffic at a state DOT level, but also at a regional sort of authority level. I mean the opportunity, when you think about sort of governance and planning for inter-jurisdictional infrastructure networks exist in a few different places. So like electric utilities or other places does a natural has a, but a completely different governance model and business models than roads do. So you see like the hole that is there. Cause there isn't this capacity in the communication sector and you see some of these analogs like, oh, I guess we be a good fix in this. And so utilities get into it and transit planners get into it, but it's really a different environment than either of those two. So, it'll be really interesting, I think kinda track like what, which of those are gonna be lessons that work and which ones are gonna just like, you can imagine a scenario where like the utility and the transportation planners are like fighting and like no one actually knows how the system works anyway, and you've got your ISP confusion, send us all your money. It's interesting.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Especially also because of all the right of ways and all the infrastructure that goes along the roads, not even so much, just transportation planning, but that's kind of like a protected space. I'm working in Virginia, north Texas, and so much construction goes out to three counties. So, it becomes impact planning, but also disaster management. When you cut the line, three counties lose access to 911. So, somebody that actually knew the importance of that when

Speaker 2: Yeah, those of us who have been in broadband planning for a while now have been saying that everyone needs to be on the same page for a long time. So, I think you're getting transportation interested now because now we're talking about federal, state, and once you get the state involved and you get all the politicians involved for three counties and the cities, transportation starts to take notice. So, I think it's just about importance on broadband to the right people to get it included in all the funding that gets passed down. It's just something else they have to do. And now they have it as part of the state planning. It's not just this county, it's part of a plan.

Jake Varn: It becomes more of an inter-agency effort when you get the governors' office involved.

Speaker 2: When you're talking about broadband, it's important. Even some of the counties thought of this. We always say the state needs to communicate with local governments and so the ISP knows the city and county partners. Now, we're starting to see that maybe it's the county that needs to reach out to ISPs. Maybe it has to go both ways and both need to be responsible for that.

Jake Varn: Iowa has a useful model. Every state gives you has to be like five-year planning for every single project. They can make changes to, they do a lot. Iowa puts a map up on their broadband website for where all the road projects are going be and the point of contact for ISPs or communities to coordinate.

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Brian Donoghue: Same point the coordination side as the transportation side. One thing that South Bend, Indiana, had done was set out as part of their communities to have something didn't, again, they work detail how they articulate that general, but a dig-once policy. It is very, very highly localized.

Speaker 3: Do you know, Jake, that Iowa map, how much that it's used or how current and the info is a up there. It doest actually result in additional.

Jake Varn: It's pretty new, I think it's a new, I feel like I saw it first time, like two months ago, so it's refresh, but I can check.

Speaker 3: Dig-once is one of those things that sound really good in theory, but don't work quite like you imagine. It's been eight years and it's been a difficult thing.

Speaker 1: Well there's lot of things to coordinate for sure. There are lot of construction projects and people who have to coordinate for a construction project. Somebody else is construction, somebody else for budget. Yeah, absolutely.

Jake Varn: You can have a policy, but not everyone talking to one another.

Speaker 1: Right. If it's a difference of waiting six months if you could everyone, the same page, then somebody might not want to wait that long.

Speaker 4: And then in our case, we have 600 miles of roads in our county and you may have this little 30-foot island of conduit out in the middle of nowhere. It's not a good use of that conduit. That's hard to get right now to put it there. You know, It's never gonna get there.

Corian Zacher: Which I think that's a really good point because we've heard that from other people who say things like, "I can see a fiber line outside my house, but I'm not served by fiber, I'm still using satellite and paying exorbitant amounts." I think that that might be an interesting thing to talk about is how can we coordinate to make use of some of these assets and just been out there, but people aren't able to actually use them in the way that they need to be used. Does anyone have any thoughts on that? We know that mapping is such an important part of that because we know that there's a lot of dark fiber that just isn't available for the public to see, to know that they can even connect to it.

Speaker 2: That's the start of private partnerships too, whether it's an or whatever that owns our fiber partnership.

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Speaker 1: That, yeah. I think that the environment wasn't always conducive for transparency and sharing, and I think that's the real struggle when we're trying to build more impactful programs, more impactful funding models and how to actually solve the process and gets off the last 10 years we've been working on this. And I think that's a lot of it is that they don't share that information. Even if the maps were better, we still have trouble with getting the providers to communicate.

Speaker 2: In fact, a lot of it is mapped, but a lot of the counties and judges and people who need to know don't even know it exists.

Speaker 1: It's really about transparency and availability of information and getting people over that tendency not to share information cause they are jealously guarding it. It's hard to get the information out, but a lot of the things would be solved if people would share information.

Corian Zacher: Yeah. I feel like so much of this discussion is just, we need people to all get the same room and talk to each other. I think that's something that a lot of people are asking right now. Do any of you have some best practices for like holding some of those convenings or like try and get people in dialogue with each other? Are there any things you've seen that been successful communication strategies?

Speaker 2: Regional strategies has helped a lot the counties next door to each other. That's power in numbers, that's been real helpful

Corian Zacher: Yeah. It seems like there's a lot more of that lately.

Speaker 3:

I'm not always sure that getting people in room together and about more is the best, most productive solution. Not there's anything you like, it's people around, but like that has been happening for a long time. I don't feel like the places where we're weak are cause of lack of people getting in a room together and having a conversation. I think it's sort of an unwillingness to collaborate about who should be doing what, we just can't figure this out. It's like there are active sets of interests that overlap in different ways that are either aligned or misaligned or differently aligned toward solving certain problems. So, to me to take in our work in one, which is sort of broad, you know, what is our regional, you know, digital plan and what's that gonna look like?

We've gotta have some docs refer to on that. No one's gonna do that much on, but it's still something that makes people feel like there's something. But then within that there lots of specific tactics, like big one for a good idea. If you don't have like a target focused area, I don't think for where we want somebody who's been actually call the different construction people and call the cities in different jurisdictions who actually do work with that area actually for relationships with

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the contractors who do work in that area ones. It's one thing to talk to the city who is giving a permit, and another who like the person who holding the shovel. Be intentional about how you use that for a specific outcome. There is value in identifying some project, opportunities that are really discreet that you can find willing partners to attack, solve a real problem.

Speaker 1:

I think that maybe might be a step one and step two. They need to actually talk amongst themselves and figure out where they're at. But yes, once they do figure out where they need to go, the more the right people at the table.

Speaker 2: Yeah. The connection is that somebody has to be in charge. Sometimes, nobody puts it on their back to be in charge. Someone's gotta be in charge.

Speaker 3:

But a lot of this stuff we don't need. That's again where it depends, but there's lot of stuff you don't need authority to. It's like there's a group of, farmers, I think about the same. They were like, we're gonna raise money, we're gonna do the thing. Build like you can build networks. This is one of the differences from roads. Like you can't build roads on your own, but yeah, you can build networks. You can do a big problem, you don't need statutory authority to call your, you know, cities and public works departments, contractors, to figure out where people are digging and, and raise money to lay conduit. You need someone to do it.

Speaker 2:

I'm listening what you're saying. I think, do we want a billion, different little networks? And how do you make it, who takes care of those, and who connects those? I mean, to me, there still needs to be a plan, and delegation.

Jake Varn:

Good point on taking, building up capacity to either engage with partners or ISPs or be able to take on the jobs themselves. It feels like from working with a few state offices, state offices that are successful can. They sometimes feel like they can just put the grants funding out there and if no one's applying to it, they can have those stakeholder meetings. They can make more funding available for people to be able to prepare for the grant program. But if no one's actually trying to actively serve that community or if there's just one provider that's not willing to change the speed that they're offering or meet the state's thresholds. And it just feels like they don't have the tools to empower more people to that marketplace.

Speaker 3: We're fortunate, we got pretty good infrastructure. Several providers built out robust fiber networks. And so, if you're in a community and there's no

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provider, and you're just trying to figure out how to get a fiber network, that is more daunting. Just when it comes to skills or training or digital navigator programs, any these other things, those things can also be daunting, but I don't think they're beyond the skills of people to figure out how to do a training program. And there are so many guides out there, all you need is someone to take charge or commissioned to take charge.

Speaker 4: Overwhelmed is the word. Capacity to do this kind of thing. I am the one who is supposed to be in charge in my county. Some days it's managing expectations. My name is out there on our website. I get calls from, you know, aunt Mary down the road who doesn't have internet and needs it to get her insulin pump information sent over to her doctor or people who have second homes up here who wanna run 'em out at our vacation area that want gigabit service. And I've got that kind of conversation happening at the same time I'm trying to get state funding and federal funding and writing grants. It's a lot to try to manage in a rural community with a small staff. You know what I mean? So, it's absolutely overwhelming.

You do whatever you can and the next day you do the next thing that you can, you know. It's hard to be proactive though in that situation, you're, you're basically reacting. You're putting out fires all the time and it's a hard place to be when new things come along.

Speaker 1: And that's a really good point. Maybe we need to know more about what is it not. It's not that people aren't interested, they really are interested in broadband, but they've got a water infrastructure problem or all the other millions of things.

Speaker 4:

Well, and we would not be anywhere near where we are without having a broadband consultant on our payroll. I mean, we have worked with them since 2011. They did our first feasibility analysis and a plan, they just did a refresh for us. If they weren't there, I would not have taken this job. We don't have the engineering expertise for, you know, an ISP sends us their plan. Wow. Looks good to me, but I don't know.

Speaker 2: That's what we tell people. You're going to see a lot of things that look good, but you really need something in there it's gonna work.

We help communities assess their access, their adoption, sustainability. If there's anything about going on, we kinda put it all together, survey residents to help learn where they are. We call it a technology action plan, but it's really about assessing the steps. But what we do find commonly is nobody in charge. Or if there is someone it's overwhelming. For so long, there was no money. Now, there's so much money, people don't know what to spend it on.

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Speaker 4: Federal grants are not fun. We write our own, but oh my.

Francella Ochillo:

I just have two follow up questions. I wanted to tug at this piece about who's in charge. I do wonder what happens to communities that don't necessarily have an officer, that'll miss out on funding opportunities. To what extent are there ways that we can support communities before they get a consultant? If there are pending deadlines, how do you help people take responsibility?

Speaker 4:

Yeah. For us, the process went: our commissioners or our county governing entity asked our department of economic development, "What is the one thing that we could do that would make the biggest bang for our buck if we go for, for the limited funding that's out there?" and broadband came back as the number one thing, and this is back in 2000, this is a while ago, right? So, they went out and they found funding to hire a consultant to do a feasibility analysis, figure out what would it take. And from that point on, they just made it a priority every year when funding windows opened up, that could serve broadband, they applied. So, we've gotten multiple federal and state grants across the years to, to just start doing something. And, you know, and some, we didn't do everything, right?

Like, I mean, the fixed wireless is a great solution for some people, but unless you've got line of sight, it doesn't really work. And so, you know, that's where we've got some customers who are super happy and some who are not. They did hire a person in economic development to cover broadband as one of their duties, but it was never the sole duty until last July. So, it's taken us a while to build up the momentum and to get to the point where they think it's important enough and there's enough money coming down the pipe that we have to have somebody to take care of this.

Francella Ochillo: Just wanted to think about what is the thing that's not gonna covered on this of whether it's your grant cycle, your grant. What is the thing that's not getting addressed in funding?

Speaker 4:

Long driveways for us, It's like a 300 foot section. Are we gonna do environmental for 50 of those in a grant application? No. Like there has to be another way to handle that. I just applied Friday for a grant to fund like customer connection grants. I'm calling 'em. Yeah. An ISP has a run to get to a house and it's gonna cost a certain amount, the county will pay that. We just were calling out a stipend or subsidy to just get people connected.

Jake Varn: There's a few have line extension program. Some have the customer apply to states, other times it's the customer.

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Speaker 4: I prefer fewer applicants, so I say the ISP because otherwise, it's just me.

Speaker 2: We really need to change the definition of broadband because if you're at 25/3, you can't get grant funding for that. That speed needs to be increased across the board.