

# Next Century Cities

## Community Engagement for Broadband Planning

### Why is it important to engage the community?

The planning, deployment, and ongoing sustainability of a network is a big undertaking, and requires resources, creativity, and patience. For this reason, the success of a local broadband network is dependent on both buy-in from community leadership and engagement and enthusiasm from the community.

It's important that a network is built with community-specific needs and goals in mind from the beginning. What do community members want to achieve with connectivity? Think beyond entertainment and social media to uses like health, education, and economic and community development. Does the proposed network address these goals?

Involving community members in the planning process can also help create a feeling of shared ownership and responsibility for the network, which makes a big difference in carrying a project through to completion and long-term success.

### Who should I engage?

Essentially every individual and stakeholder group will be impacted by connectivity. Each community will have a different set of stakeholders to engage, but as a starting point, consider: local leadership (e.g. city, county, or town councils), anchor institutions (schools, libraries, healthcare facilities), students, religious leaders, business and non-profit organizations, elected officials, artists, housing authorities, first responders, any entity that manages infrastructure in the community (telephone, electric, water, transportation), local media (newspapers, television, and radio stations), and industry partners.



## How do I do it?

The process of engagement will look different for every community, but it's always helpful to meet people where they are. Connecting with formal and informal groups and plugging into existing circles and conversations is easier than starting from scratch. Ideas of where to start include: parent-teacher associations, council meetings, homeowners associations, neighborhood committees, local clubs or sports teams, and wherever people congregate and spend their time (for example, libraries, laundromats, local businesses).

## What should we talk about?

### Consider:

- What broadband and/or connectivity service is currently available? (Access, technology, speed, cost)
- What community benefits are important? For example, economic development, employment opportunities, educational resources, cost savings (for the local government or for consumers), access to healthcare, etc.
- What do community members want connectivity to look like, and how does this differ from current options? This can include speed, cost, and connections to specific anchor institutions or community buildings, for example.
- What is the community willing to invest or commit, and what can be outsourced to partners? This encompasses both money and resources. Is there a willingness to take on debt or manage infrastructure? Is local ownership of the network a priority?
- Are there existing connectivity projects that could inform and/or support this work, either locally or regionally?
- Are there examples of success in similar communities?
- What local assets exist (i.e. poles, conduit, and fiber), who owns them, and what are the permitting processes for deployment or to lease?
- What known obstacles to deployment might exist? Are there topography challenges, political considerations, or cultural/environmental considerations?
- What barriers to adoption may exist? Are there unique challenges related to digital literacy levels, concerns over the negative impacts of connectivity with respect to language and culture, or challenges that arise alongside increased connectivity such as online gambling, cyber-bullying, or exposure to scams?



## What are the next steps/actions we can take?



**Establish leadership.** It's important to have a leader shepherding this process and maintaining community enthusiasm. A community broadband leader doesn't need to be a technical expert; in fact, strong communication, flexibility and problem solving, relationship building, and passion are some of the more important skills. If you're reading this, you might be a good candidate!

**Be consistent with engagement.** Frequent updates for community members about project progress can help maintain interest and buy-in. It's often helpful to give updates even if there hasn't been a significant development. Consider what medium to which your community will be most responsive. For example, emails or in-person meetings might be preferred.

**Create a written record.** Writing down meeting minutes, communications with stakeholders, and participants helps organize a project, and can be helpful in case you need to show demand for service.

**Set objectives.** Use conversations about community needs as a means of setting goals and determining metrics for success. These goals might have to do with project finances and budget, the number of premises connected, issuing a request for proposals (RFP), or something else entirely.

**Connect with other communities.** Are there similarly situated communities that have built a successful network? Learning from others' successes and failures can help inform priorities and action steps.

**Engage with other resources.** In addition to talking to other communities, it can be helpful to explore other resources. Next Century Cities' [Becoming Broadband Ready toolkit](#) offers a step-by-step guide for local leaders looking to increase broadband investment in their communities, as well as dozens of additional resources. Leaders should also reach out to other experts, such as:

- [The Institute for Local Self-Reliance](#)
- [The Internet Society](#)
- [The National Digital Inclusion Alliance](#)
- [Five Lessons for Tech-Powered Civic Engagement](#)
- Your respective state broadband office, if applicable