

## **What Broadband Advocacy in Ohio Means for Communities Nationwide**

### **Corian Zacher, Policy Council for State and Local initiatives at Next Century Cities:**

Over the past few months we've been working on a case study that gives an overview of the digital divide in Ohio, and discusses strategies that local governments community organizations, and the state have taken to correct long standing disparities and broadband access and adoption in Ohio gaps and broadband access and adoption persist in both rural and urban areas in urban areas, some neighborhood, some low income residents with only a few blocks from neighborhoods with high speed infrastructure that has not been developed on their street, some rural areas have home service but it's not fast enough to reliably work and learn from home during the pandemic. These are only a few examples of the variety of challenges that Ohio communities face when it comes to digital access.

Many local governments in the state are no strangers to innovative approaches to expanding broadband service and use a variety of models to fill infrastructure gaps in their community, including through fiber to the home public wireless and open access networks. The Ohio State Legislature and governor's office had been increasingly involved in broadband policy over the last two years, particularly as the pandemic revealed the importance of maintaining a home broadband connection, increase state involvement creates tremendous opportunity for new partnerships and support for local governments the challenges remain to ensuring that state efforts are supportive of the work taking place in communities.

Today, we're joined by leaders who have been outspoken about the vital role that communities play and connecting people with faster, more affordable and more reliable broadband. This morning Francella mentioned that when leaders in one city are fired up about broadband that energy is contagious and all the communities they touch benefit our panelists today are wonderful examples of that engaging energy, Ernie Staten is the director of public service for the city of Fairlawn and his visionary ideas for improving broadband access of transform not only his own community, but have also supported cities in other cities and counties in Ohio. Montgomery County Commissioner Debbie Lieberman is currently in her fifth term, and serves on the National Association of Counties broadband Task Force and has been outspoken about the critical importance of digital access to social equity and economic opportunity for residents. Thank you so much for joining us today. We're delighted to have you and to hear your stories, Ernie, could you start us off by talking a little bit about your role and what first drew your attention to the need for improved broadband access and adoption in your community.

### **Ernie Staten, Director of Public Service, City of Fairlawn, Ohio:**

Thank you for having me here today and I'm glad everyone's able to watch this because it has become a huge topic here in the state of Ohio, all the things that the legislators, were trying to accomplish. And obviously what we're trying to accomplish in our own communities. So I'm the, I'm the service director for the city of Fairlawn and really what that means, at the end of the day is that I handle all the infrastructure for the city everything from parks to roads to the buildings within the city and in 2013, we realized that we were going to have to make some changes to

compete with the rest of the world. And one of those changes was to bring better broadband to the city, and start the utility Fairlawn gig.

**Corian Zacher:**

Commissioner Lieberman, you've been a voice for those in Montgomery County who have been disconnected throughout the pandemic. How did digital equity make its way onto your radar and become an area of focus for you?

**Commissioner Debbie Lieberman, Montgomery County, Ohio:**

Good afternoon, everybody. I first became concerned about digital equity, long before the pandemic. But, the pandemic really really brought that concern to more of a crisis. We've seen that developers and businesses want to come here. We were making sure that we had broadband available to some of the new infrastructure areas that we were providing.

The spring of 2020 with the onset of COVID really highlighted the digital divide in our county. And it was in ways that we've never seen before. I guess if we would have really thought about it, we would have said, of course, but the quarantine.

Just across the whole county. It wasn't just in the urban and rural areas, it was across the whole county. Schools sent the students home to begin Virtual Learning. Healthcare facilities ramped up with telehealth. The workplace shifted. We all started in. You have your iPad and your phone at home, your iPhone, but that might not have been enough.

The other thing that we really noticed was the social service agencies including our job and Family Services. It all became virtual those first few months and so we knew immediately that we had to do something more for our community, then the CARES dollars came.

When I look back, we got the CARES dollars out as fast as we could, but one of the challenges we had moving forward was how are we going to coordinate as we move forward because there was a lot of good work going on, but clearly it wasn't enough, I mean when I think about even arts and cultural trying to do everything virtually, so it was across everything we do.

While we knew we had public availability at community centers and libraries, they were closed down too. I saw that somebody in Kansas was doing that through the National Association of Counties and we set up a hotspot at Job and Family Services so that people could go there and apply for their benefits for unemployment, or any of these things that they weren't able to do from their own home.

As the world went into total isolation, home access to technology and reliable internet connections really went from being a luxury to a necessity.

The work that has been done since then, I'm really proud of, of course, but it hasn't been fast enough. All the money in the world can't make it happen overnight, but we're working on it.

**Corian Zacher:**

Even though you had municipal broadband before the pandemic, we know there was still a huge impact on the people living in Fairlawn. Are there any stories you would like to highlight?

**Ernie Staten:**

We have a resident that lives on a small road. He's handicapped, he's an engineer, so during the pandemic, the issue that he had was leaving his house was a struggle for him. He was at home because his business at the time had sent everyone home. So, as an engineer he's got these large files that he's working on on a daily basis that there's no way other than a fiber optic network that he would have been able to work on these large files. So, I've heard from him throughout the entire pandemic. Now he is working from home on a regular basis, even after the business open back up. It's just a great story to be able to say that we're, we're here, providing something that you would have only thought was going to be in that business setting.

It's in the residential setting here, then we have a large customer here in Fairlawn signet which used to be a large jeweler here in Fairlawn. And that, that company sent everyone home, and they were struggling with what they needed to do and they came up with this way to handle all this remote work, and they needed to be connected to AWS so during this during the entire pandemic they were struggling and didn't really reach out to us until getting closer to the end and now, now we've connected them to AWS and Chicago AWS in Columbus, so they have diverse ways to Amazon.

Plus, they're taking a 100 Gig package from Fairlawn because of all this remote work they had to, they had to increase our bandwidth. So, you know, during this pandemic where, you know, most companies couldn't survive all the things that they needed. Here, we were able to give them anything that they wanted.

And then, in our area. We're a suburb of Akron, and the city of Akron has community centers all through the city they have 14 of them, and during the pandemic. Obviously the remote work for school children was a struggle so Akron, is it has a lot of areas where they're not served by the current incumbents so they needed a way for these kids to do school work. So, everyone was going to the community centers. Akron reached out to us and now we've connected every one of the community centers for them, so kids can do the school work and, and also you know there's more than just kids that are going to those community centers, there's anyone that needs any type of help whatsoever.

Heard Commissioner Lieberman about all these other needs. Well some of those needs come right out of those community centers, so it was great that we were able to connect them at all the community centers. Keep school work going.

The pandemic really showed a lot here in Fairlawn so we were lucky we were already connected, we were already doing the work that I think everyone wants to see happen throughout all of these networks. What came out of it was that it just showed how important it

was to have a really strong network and a fiber optic network where the incumbents are not doing anything like that.

With CARES Act money, Summit County came to us and asked us to put in a private network for their criminal justice system. Criminal justice system including everything from the jails, to the judges, to Summit County's internal working, to the Oriana Houses, and any type of system that has to deal with court usage. They came to us in August, the CARES Act money had to be spent by December, so they didn't give us a whole lot of time, but we built a 17 mile fiber optic network that connected all 23 buildings, gave them this private network so that they could start doing arraignments from jail, where they weren't bringing someone in so they were trying to do these over zoom and they were having a hard time because it was two different systems, it was inferior service.

So we fixed all that and starting in January they started having their virtual court system right here in Summit County. Quite a few counties had already done some type of court system but that is all done over generally done by some incumbent provider system, whereas we were able to put this in for them. And again, it's 100% secure because it stays within that network. We're providing the internet that they need. We host the Zoom server for any Zoom meetings that they may have.

We also handled all of the WiFi within the courts. And by the way, the court system here in Summit County, their old building so Wi Fi was not as easy to pull off as one might think, but we did it in four months, what we were able to put together saves the county roughly \$750,000 a year, just in transport fees. Just shoveling prisoners or anyone to court from the jails. So, you know, the pandemic did a lot that we didn't realize needed to happen.

We have a great network, but we didn't know that there were all these struggles and by the way there. There are many struggles, we still haven't handled here in the area but you know slowly moving towards getting all that accomplished.

**Corian Zacher:**

In Montgomery County, partnerships have also been a key to success there. Could you talk a little bit about how those partnerships have impacted the response to the pandemic?

**Commissioner Lieberman:**

The partnerships with our schools, and with our jurisdictions, and our court. We were fortunate that what he (Ernie) was just describing we kind of already had, so judges were able to do remote court with attorneys, but there were so many areas that we'd never even looked at or thought about but that's as the as the year and a half, two years has moved on, we now are in a partnership with some of our jurisdictions. We've had some great work already happening around high-speed access by a nonprofit and it's a Council of Governments and so we're working more with them.

They've connected kind of the southern part of the county and and now they'd like to move up so one of our jurisdictions that doesn't really have the money we've committed to partner with them to do that. And, you know, it's what we did. Almost immediately, a study. Okay, and our digital divide study where, where are we, what, what do we have, and on paper, because it looks okay. Right. But we know that there are more partnerships to build of course we've, we've now met with and and other providers who have, you know, really come out to share with us and explain things to us but we are you know continuing to work on partnerships, I mentioned Summit County. I know that the county itself there is doing a lot of the expansion and internet work. You know the infrastructure, correct me if I'm wrong but the infrastructure is really being done by the county itself.

So that was something that we all kind of around the state budget kind of all hustled and said oh wait a minute said it don't take out all that money and, and don't not allow jurisdictions to own their own utility, basically, and I think I know you might last this later, but I mean, I think we truly have to look at it, it is a utility. Right. I mean, its infrastructure so I think almost everybody's to that point now. And then you look at what's under all that and how do we deal with all of that.

**Corian:**

If funding was available from the state and if the state was more supportive of local efforts, what would be possible in Fairlawn and other counties and cities in the state?

**Ernie Staten:**

There's no limit to what we're accomplishing here, so I would tell you that if the state were to open up and realize what's going on in these communities and embrace that allow for funding, with communities, we could change the entire outlook of the state of Ohio. So, when we started this, and things have changed a little bit but when we started this, Ohio was 48 out of 50 states in the country, with broadband access.

It's changed. Last I saw it's at about 26, and we hope that we've had something to do with that a little bit. A long way, but still 26. So, when people are worried about us being a flyover state they, they're not helping with the flyover idea because we're 26th in the country so that by them opening this up and allowing for funding and it hasn't happened yet but I do believe that it will change I believe the governor is very behind this, even if all the legislators are not 100% behind it.

I think what it will do is it will just make us compete with the rest of the world and compete with the rest of the country, we will look a little more like the East Coast and West Coast. Right now, people don't look at Ohio the same way.

But one of the big reasons why we started it was the mayor would go overseas to trade shows and at those trade shows, he would hear: the water is abundant there, that the land is cheap, and it looks like you have talent. But you don't have any internet, you don't have fiber optics. So, we couldn't compete with anyone at that time.

Now at least we're having a discussion, but the state needs to understand that they need to embrace that and embracing it is a full gamut. It can't just be embracing the incumbents or embracing cities only, it needs to be everything. I have no real issue with the incumbents personally. We've always had a good relationship, even if we're competing against one another. But it can't just be all the money going to them and it has to go to the cities and.

I think I saw 32 communities that are truly doing something like what we're doing here in the state. You can see that there are people trying to make a difference. And they're being held back. I just had a discussion today with Summit County about the idea of maybe saying Summit County should up our speeds to say 300 by 300 is a minimum.

**Commissioner Lieberman:**

Well, the state. The state of Ohio is relying on the old idea of 25 and three, and the federal government has already come out and said, it needs to be at least 100 by 100. So, it's amazing that the status falling, a little behind here and then keeping it behind. So I believe I don't have all the answers but I can tell you that I believe that it's limitless what we're doing. So if they open up the funding the all those limitless ideas could come to fruition.

I totally agree. you know, we play on words here but it's so broad. We talked about equity, we talked about rural and urban and economic development, and it all fits together, speed, fiber networks. It's so, so important. And I agree with you that the governor, and specifically the lieutenant governor who has taken broadband on as one of his pillar issues. They get it. And you're right and jobs Ohio gets it, we, we are being left behind.

So all these dollars we have to figure out how do they work together, you know, the new dollars the new infrastructure dollars any other ARPA dollars, how are we going to work it all together and so we've had some good discussions with the governor and his team about, please let's have a plan. And so I did mention that we're actually, so we did, and I will put this online we did our first digital equity study, and the next step is we're going to do an all encompassing strategy to have to have a real strategy, especially as this money, the money that isn't gonna have to be spent like the CARES dollars were immediately right.

So we want to take our time and make sure we're doing the right thing. So we're going out for an RFP. The other thing I want to share is that the [National Association of Counties Broadband Task Force report is now out](#). And it's not specific to Ohio but I think it really affects all this.

We know it's not cheap. And we know we Montgomery County. Just so just to let you know how much we have already invested, through our CARES dollars. We did a \$300,000 contract with a provider for our boys and girls club, and five of our affordable housing neighborhoods, who had no, no drops, nothing. So we were able to give 1000 people that drops and Chromebooks.

We also worked with Dayton public schools. We spent 1.4 million a day in public schools for hot spots and Chromebooks, they were going in at one point they had buses going into the

neighborhoods was hotspots so many kids so that and that's urban right rural had same issues, because we're county about a third of its were all of there are 540,000 people.

We offered through our educational service group we spent 1.1 million on hotspots, and 2.1 million on Chromebooks set, and that was just a tiny drop in the county need, so this is great. I hope we all continue to have these conversations like this because it's so important.

**Corian Zacher:**

Thank you so much for sharing that.

We did get one question in the chat so Ernie I know you talked about connecting Akron, and Summit County, are there any other communities that have sort of been on your radar to work with. The question is: "What have you been doing to connect with folks outside of the municipality and do other townships care?"

**Ernie Staten:**

Well, so what we're working on right at the moment is, and we were working on this. Actually, Debbie already kind of mentioned something about it. We've been working with Summit County and before all everything happened at the state.

Our intent was to take the ARPA money and use a large share of it somewhere around \$30 million to build a ring around the entire county, connecting all 31 communities. So that's still the plan.

It's not as much about the broadband arm. It's going to be used for broadband but what the real intent behind it was, we need some type of a safety system here in Summit County. So this would connect all the communities, and then through broadband. Depending on what each community wants to do then they could have their own utility. They could be connected. If they want just to be connected as government, at least they would have a spot at our data center to have off-site storage and they could get internet from FairlawnGig. They could they could kind of almost go off grid.

So, the pandemic. Obviously we didn't need to go off grid but right at the end of the pandemic we had that major problem on the east coast where the pipeline there was a big problem there and the communities around there had an issue. This would be a way that our thought was we need to be able to go off of the main grid if something bad were to happen in the world. It's going to be safety, they will be able to take advantage of broadband.

So hopefully what comes out of that is a lot of communities actually contract with Fairlawn to go around and get service to their local community. One area that we are really working hard at is the whole idea of the underserved area. We have quite a few areas in Akron that are underserved. And we want to make sure that we get something there. So that'd be part of what we're doing with this ring. And then, and then that safety piece. So that's really what we're working towards now, on a daily basis I get three or four calls from communities around the

state wanting to know if there is a way that we can get connected together or, can you help us through trying to start our own utility.

So we're, we're always working on something, but right at the moment is really focused on getting this middle mile ring here in Summit County.

**Corian Zacher:**

I see there's a follow up question on that, about what the plan is for the last mile. Once the middle mile is built.

**Ernie Staten:**

In this state, every municipality has the right to form their own utility. So, that's how we're approaching this were saying.

We have no issue with managing that utility, but it, it would be a little strange for any city to go around and have a utility and kind of force it into community so we're trying to work with them that, do you want this now, if they if it turns out that they don't want anything to do with the utility, and there are obviously areas that need help, then I think federal law is going to step in and help. I know Summit County really wants to be involved in something like that.

Every county has a few struggles with jurisdictions. We have a MHA (Metropolitan Housing Authority), the Akron Housing Authority, that is in almost every community. So who's taking care of them or the school systems that go beyond the jurisdiction, how is that going to be taken care of. So, that's why the county really needs to be in charge of something like this, because their jurisdiction handles all of those issues or the library system or something like that, it goes outside of every one jurisdiction, so the county will really kind of own this middle mile and Fairlawn will manage it for them and then potentially manage utilities in, in all the local areas.

**Commissioner Lieberman:**

And I think that's a great idea. It's not something worth pursuing yet because I talked earlier about that nonprofit Council of Governments that's doing that. But one of the things that's in the budget bill that just passed the Senate wanted to take that out.

And it just shows how strong some of our providers can be lobby men so we just have to stay as jurisdictions, we have to be just as strong and say, that's going to work because we have a lot of providers who all want a piece of the future, right, and, like, but, you know, we have to again I talked about the having a plan. Earlier I mean that's going to be some important for jurisdictions counties regions in the whole state so we want to do this right, you know we don't be it's that saying you know dig once, I mean we we really have to do this right, and so I appreciate the work that that you're already doing there.

And we're going to continue on this path because it's critical. It's a utility, it's infrastructure, so this is. Thanks for giving us this opportunity.

**Corian Zacher:**

This is our last question because we only have two minutes left but if in one minute Could you talk about the role that broadband plays in agriculture and promoting food security in the future.

**Commissioner Lieberman:**

I can start with that because I recently was at a farm bureau meeting, as I said about a third of our counties still rural and, you know, those businesses those farm businesses need just as much access as other folks. I also in our meeting where some of the Future Farmers of America students and I said, How do you guys do this we have no access, you know, so we know there were kids that in our inner city, and those those jurisdictions and townships and that we lost, but there were also world kids, that didn't have the opportunity to go online. Maybe they had a cell phone but it's really hard to, you know, do your work on a cell phone so we saw that it was really hard, and as far as the food.

Yeah, you know, and initially getting the word out, how do you get the word out, how do you interact with people but you know we have a whole food security stretch strategy and a task force that works around that but it's everywhere. It's not just rural, it's not just urban, all of us.

**Ernie Staten:**

I don't have the rural area here but I actually live in a rural area it's kind of funny, I have a farm, but one thing that I would say is I've seen over the last probably 10 years that rural has really, that's where the money has been going is rural and what we see just because of the City of Akron, we see, there's a lot of urban that needs to be taken care of, so that that really, it needs to become more of a balancing act and again that's probably where it makes the most sense that just allow cities to partake in the funding, so that you can take care of both areas.

**Corian Zacher:**

Thank you both so much for being here today. I see that we're out of time but I wish I could talk to you all day because these are such great stories. And I hope that those in the audience will check out the case study when we release it in the next couple of weeks.