

2014 NWCCOG – Broadband Accomplishments and Activities

By Nathan Walowitz

The need for broadband access continues to grow as the public in the United States and around the NWCCOG region hunger for greater access to more services, media sources, and applications that connect people with one another. Businesses need closer relationships with their customers, remote and location independent employees require broadband to keep in touch with their employers and customers. Governments and political representatives increasingly want closer connections with their constituents, and all of us with our families and friends. The entertainment and media industries have exponentially increased the amount of content and the video quality of that content available online. More people have computers, tablet devices and smartphones which all require broadband access. This drives the need for continued expansion of our online or broadband internet connection capacity and speeds.

The numbers continue to show that internet use by rural Americans is only slightly lower than urban and suburban Americans. A 2014 study by Pew Research showed that while internet usage varies significantly based on age and education level, 84% of rural American adults use the internet with younger members of the population having the highest usage. In fact, 18-29 year olds and those with higher levels of formal education top the list at 97% using the internet. This is one of the reasons it is imperative that we continue to strive for development of better access to higher speed broadband networks in rural Colorado.

To help drive this development, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in late December 2014 issued an order that increases the minimum broadband speeds for projects that use Connect America Fund money. The new FCC definition of broadband is 10 Megabits per second (Mbps) download and 1 Mbps upload. This is an increase from 4 Mbps down/1 Mbps up which was the standard the FCC set in 2010. FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler has stated that 4 Mbps down /1 Mbps up isn't actually enough and he would like to see the FCC consider raising this speed to 25 Mbps down/3 Mbps down. This reflects the reality that more bandwidth is and higher speeds are needed to support the things people actually do online today; including streaming movies and video content, news broadcasts, reading online publications, using internet-based telephone or online video chat services.

In 2013 the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments undertook the development of a regional broadband strategic plan with the intent of improving broadband throughout the region primarily for the sake of contributing to economic development but also to improve quality of life and contribute to public safety.

The regional participants includes all of the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments members (Eagle, Grand, Jackson, Pitkin and Summit Counties; most municipalities in those counties; Steamboat Springs; Glenwood Springs; and Carbondale). Additionally, Moffat, Rio Blanco and Routt Counties chose to participate.

Each county appointed a representative to serve on a Broadband Steering Committee to help guide the efforts of the NWCCOG Broadband program. This committee still meets on an as needed basis to share successes, work items, and Broadband initiative and challenges in their communities.

With assistance from a Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) grant, NWCCOG issued an RFP and selected Mid States Consultants, with Paul Reconzone as the project lead, to create a strategic plan for the region.

In early 2014, NWCCOG transitioned its Broadband program from strategic planning to initiative driven implementation. Nate Walowitz was hired as the NWCCOG Regional Broadband Coordinator in April to lead this effort. One of first accomplishments was the development of a targeted, measurable, actionable Regional Project Plan. This action plan was created through the integration of a number of recommendations in the strategic plan and stakeholder specific requirements based on meetings and site visits with all of the region's government stakeholders.

Funding for the development of the Strategic Plan and the Regional Broadband Coordinator position is provided, in part, through a grant from DOLA.

In June 2014, the NWCCOG Broadband Steering Committee approved a project plan that included 23 initiatives for 2014 and 2015. Progress on these initiatives is being accomplished by working cooperatively with our government and Economic Development District partners.

One of the successful methodologies we are employing to support our initiatives is forging close relationships with multiple levels of government officials and existing or potential service providers. This has allowed NWCCOG to develop synergistic conversations and relationships which benefit broadband initiatives within each of our jurisdictions and the region as a whole.

NWCCOG is working to address some of the challenges to ubiquitous broadband deployment that our county and local government stakeholders have in common. The lack of population density, distance between population centers and our beautiful mountain terrain clearly affects the business case for service providers that wish to create or extend their Broadband infrastructure and networks in our region. To help off-set these economic factors, we are working closely with our stakeholders, service providers and the State Office of Information Technology to coordinate and prepare responses for FCC Rural Broadband Expansion Experiments funding.

NWCCOG Economic Development and Broadband teams are actively engaging with regional and local economic development officials to understand the population, visitor, and business metrics for each area and how Broadband availability and performance affects each community.

The NWCCOG Broadband project and our constituent government agencies continue to drive service providers to improve broadband services in NW Colorado. We are accomplishing these goals through a number of specific projects to address specific regional needs. NWCCOG continues to lead the state in the development of measurable, attainable broadband projects. The key to the NWCCOG strategy is

assisting in the development and deployment of solutions that specifically address the needs of each individual area. A one size fits all approach is not the optimal solution for our region.

During 2014 our region created, and in some cases completed, specific projects to address the needs of individual towns and counties. Here are some of the significant projects that have been undertaken in the region.

NWCCOG is working directly with broadband providers; CenturyLink, Comcast, and others, to provide more robust and redundant network connections and broadband services for the entire region. This should drive increased competition, improved services, and lower prices for broadband.

NWCCOG sponsored a Regional Broadband Working Session where county and local government officials could talk with one another about broadband and cellular communications issues and challenges. The results of this session were delivered to service providers during an afternoon session to help providers and governments find common ground to work together to obtain better services and open communication paths to support their local area and the entire region. These conversations were facilitated by Benjamin Little, the CEO of Centerline Solutions in Golden, CO.

Rio Blanco County, Moffat, and Routt Counties continue to work on development of broadband network infrastructure projects that will improve broadband speeds, availability and pricing for their constituents.

Rio Blanco County has a plan to build out fiber to the block and fiber to the tower to support deployment of broadband services to all their citizens. This project is being supported by two selected public/private partnerships. This is a bold undertaking that will create county owned broadband infrastructure that enables service providers to cost effectively deliver broadband, entertainment and voice services across a 21st Century network.

The Northwest Colorado Broadband Cooperative launched its Carrier-Neutral Location or CNL in Steamboat Springs. The CNL provides a single point of aggregation for government, school and other broadband traffic in Routt County. This allows multiple service providers to deliver broadband services and creates a competitive environment that has helped to lower the cost of broadband services in the area.

The Town of Red Cliff is currently working with a start-up wireless ISP (WISP) to provide broadband service and Voice over IP telephone service to the community. The provider anticipates two plans; 25 Mbps down/5 Mbps up and 10 Mbps down/1 Mbps up to subscribers. To support these efforts, the town is actively pursuing grants to build out two communications tower sites needed by the WISP to get its signal into town and distribute to subscribers. These towers will have the capacity to host SCADA antennas for the towns' water supply and wastewater management plants and future commercial or public safety communications services. A demonstration was conducted in October with full commercial service anticipated once construction is completed in Summer 2015.

This summer, existing dark (unlit) fiber connection between Steamboat Springs and Craig was lit by CenturyLink. Services are being provided by CenturyLink, Mammoth Networks and Eagle-Net. This was accomplished by concerted efforts and pressure on CenturyLink by Routt County, City of Steamboat Springs, Steamboat Springs Chamber Resort Association, and private service providers. This fiber connection provides additional bandwidth, an alternate services path and the ability to deliver broadband capabilities to western Routt County.

Pitkin County released an RFP and selected a consultant to help them develop a county specific strategic plan to provide broadband to unserved and underserved areas throughout the entire Roaring Fork Valley. This plan will include financial modeling, an assessment of existing assets, and a detailed analysis of public/private partnership and funding opportunities. This is a critical step forward for Pitkin County in determining how to best encourage and support greater broadband deployment throughout the county.

NWCCOG has also been active in Summit County working with carriers to improve cellular phone service in the county. We are providing assistance to Summit Public TV/Radio to improve services to their transmitter site. This includes fiber to the tower and investigating the potential of using their site as a network link for wireless internet service providers. Summit County and NWCCOG are working directly with wireless and broadband providers to improve wireless services and broadband access to residents, businesses and visitors.

This fall the Town of Kremmling approved construction of a new Verizon Wireless cell site in town. Among the benefits of this site will be expanded 4G cell phone coverage in many parts of town and most importantly cell phone service at the schools. This will enhance public safety and convenience for residents and visitors. NWCCOG provided comments in support of this site at a town planning meeting.

On the regulatory front, voters in Rio Blanco County and the Town of Red Cliff passed ballot referenda to free themselves for the onerous restrictions of Senate Bill 05-152. In doing so, they have freed their elected officials to enter into partnerships with private organizations, to build out and own infrastructure to support the deployment of telecommunications services (including broadband), and if necessary, become as service provider to businesses and consumers.

NWCCOG is committed to continuing to produce results for our Northwest Colorado constituents and paving the way for better broadband and wireless services in 2015.

Update: In February of 2015 the FCC issued a ruling that increases the minimum speed of broadband connections to 25 Mbps down and 3 Mbps up.