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Aspen
Snowmass Village

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Dillon
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Rio Blanco County Broadband
Press Release from NWCCOG
By Jon Stavney, Executive Director
January 2017

On January 3rd, NWCCOG joined representatives from three Colorado State agencies who drove 250 miles across snowy roads from Denver to join regional and Rio Blanco County officials in Meeker to celebrate a successful local broadband initiative that will offer 1 gigabyte access to fiber for every home and business in both Meeker and Rangely. The rollout also offers wireless broadband for the remaining one third of county residents living further afield. It enhances both cell service and public safety communications across the region.

With fewer than 7,000 residents and “neighboring towns” 60 miles apart that now share a locally funded “middle mile” fiber connection between them, just how important and unique this is for Rio Blanco County may be difficult to translate to businesses used to a consistent connection for credit card machines or households in Metro districts used to multiple wireless devices streaming movies.

The rollout plan received 82% voter support to spend general fund dollars on Broadband in November of 2014 following significant research and planning by Rio Blanco County. Blake Mobley, Rio Blanco IT Director wrote the County broadband plan published in June of 2014. He was hired with that goal in mind. At this event, Mobley was Master of Ceremonies for more than 12 dignitaries who spoke.

Brian Shephard, Broadband Program Manager from Colorado Governor’s Office of Information Technology (OIT) noted that the project leveraged a problem-solving mentality of local Coloradoans to prove “your zip code should not dictate your access to the 21st Century.”

Notably absent from the celebration was any major brand name internet provider, due to the small market in this far corner of Colorado. Paul Recanzone from Colorado Fiber Community, which won the contract for Rio Blanco County network management, said that there is currently a “70% take rate” for subscriptions on the network, with over 500 orders. He noted how flabbergasted a Houston, TX-based energy company’s IT department was when he recently told them that he could provide 1 gig wireless broadband access to their site in Rio Blanco County.

Chantal Unfug, Director of the Division of Local Government for the Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) said that state leaders were as excited as anyone in Meeker. She highlighted the regional cooperation as a template that the state would like to see replicated across far-flung rural edges of Colorado. Unfug complimented regional broadband coordinator, Nate Walowitz whose position at Northwest Colorado Council of Governments (NWCCOG) is specifically designed to empower this kind of local initiative.

Meredith Martiel from Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT), the keepers of Blueprint 2.0, the state economic development plan, also spoke of how successful Rio Blanco officials were in keeping their project “top of mind” with State officials in Denver.

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The collaborative groundwork being celebrated was actually established months earlier by Mobley as IT director for the Meeker School District when he acquired access to unused fiber for a school building in 1999. From his position at the school district, Mobley began finding ways to link the town hall, library and then other nearby entities with fiber until the Meeker Metropolitan Area Network (Meeker MAN) developed. So, in 2014 when the county decided to utilize state efforts through DOLA that were beginning to align for a county-wide project, the Commissioners recruited Mobley with the challenge of writing a broadband implementation plan in two months.

In Meeker, it was clear that the arrival of arguably the fastest internet service in the state had different meanings for different citizens and user groups. Shawn Bolton, Chairman of the Rio Blanco Board of County Commissioners said that now, "you can watch a movie without constant pauses", while "doing video meetings." He regularly overhears ranchers from some especially remote parts of the county telling others about where they suddenly enjoy cellular service. Superintendents from both Rio Blanco and Moffat County school districts were present to testify that providing additional Advanced Placement and other on-line classes and on-line testing for their rural students means they "are not restricted" by a lack of access in spite being in a place where you can send "a kid safely across town to get a candy bar."

Jeff Devere, CIO of Colorado Northwestern Community College in Rangely was ecstatic about no longer "having to explain to 200 incoming eighteen-year old entering freshmen that they don't have enough bandwidth for use of their personal devices." In fact, offering the fastest internet in rural Colorado is suddenly a selling point for CNCC.

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