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Neighborly Enters Muni Broadband Market with Ambitious Accelerator Project.

More than 100 communities applied to join Neighborly's inaugural Community Broadband Accelerator, prompting the company to expand the cohort to 35 participants in 18 states.

In a new initiative that has already been expanded by popular demand, 35 groups representing cities, counties, towns and municipal utilities across 18 states will join private-sector partners in the first-ever Neighborly Community Broadband Accelerator.

The cohort, announced on Nov. 15, will get underway later this year and conclude sometime in 2019. It's the first-ever broadband endeavor for the San Francisco-based company, which links communities to capital and has helped finance such traditional public projects as schools, bridges, playgrounds and roads. More recently, however, Neighborly has focused on supporting infrastructure that will make communities "more resilient and more future-proof," said Product Manager Garrett Brinker.

Nearly a year after the Federal Communications Commission voted to repeal net neutrality, Brinker and incoming members of the new cohort said it's clearer than ever that the availability of affordable, high-speed broadband is essential for public entities across the U.S. to improve connectivity, fight brain drain and bolster their workforces and economies. Financing and funding are key aspects of any broadband project and the realization that many municipalities don't address these areas early enough in the process helped inspire creation of the Accelerator, which opened its application process in August.

The company initially planned on accepting around 10 groups but received more than 100 applications that it reviewed with an eye for network feasibility, geographic diversity and overall effort. The enthusiastic response motivated Neighborly to roughly triple the number of participants. The company believes that broadband is foundational for modern infrastructure and smart city efforts alike; and widening participation would improve the group's capacity to educate and inform members.

"Just like the bridges did in the 20th century, broadband infrastructure can help unlock economic prosperity, the creation of jobs, new educational opportunities and ways in which people can become more connected to anyone and anything around the world," Brinker said, comparing its potential to the 1930s construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, an early economic enabler for the Bay Area. Having closely examined how to establish a broadband network in an educational curriculum guided by industry representatives, participants will have access to competitive Neighborly financing at the program's end.

WORKFORCE A MOTIVATOR FOR WISCONSIN COUNTY

Keeping economic engines running smooth is definitely an aim for officials in Sauk County, Wis., part of a Neighborly Accelerator that includes partners from Laramie, Wyo., to JEA, the community-owned utility in Jacksonville, Fla.; and from Baird, Texas, to Palo Alto, Calif.

Jared Pinkus, who has been Sauk County's community liaison for nearly eight months, said his position was created following a 2014 survey of rural broadband that identified a need for better connectivity, particularly in the southwest section of the county. Pinkus said that, despite ongoing efforts, the county continues to face a workforce gap as its population ages and younger residents move to better connected areas.

"We're situated right outside of Madison," said Pinkus. "It's the capital so there's a lot going on, it's very attractive to a younger workforce and so it's 'How do we tap into that?' We went through a number of initiatives over the course of four years to try to figure out how to attract and retain specifically millennials, but (also) young families or skilled workers."

The county's topography, including hilly areas with dense forest, is a natural challenge to deploying broadband, but the county continues to study the need and hopes to drill down on financing and learn from participants and private-sector partners with more experience.

Standing up high-speed broadband would cost nearly $50 million, Sauk County's second study determined, but supervisors are supportive and joining the Accelerator should help the county's effort, Pinkus said. Local connectivity efforts are also progressing. The Reedsburg Utility Commission, which provides Internet, TV and telephone services to more than 4,400 customers in Sauk County, recently received two state grants totaling nearly $450,000 to connect a fiber backbone.

OREGON PARTNERS SEEK DIGITAL EQUITY

Leaders in one Oregon metropolitan area have already bonded over improving broadband. Michael Hanna, a data engineer at Multnomah County and campaign manager for the regional Municipal Broadband PDX campaign, said last winter's FCC vote galvanized support for creating a publicly owned Internet utility with permanent net neutrality. Last year, new data showed 30 percent of Latino households in Multnomah, and 28 percent of households with residents ages 65 and older, lack broadband access.

The county and the cities of Portland, Gresham, Troutdale, Fairview and Wood Village will partner in an upcoming broadband feasibility study, Hanna said. By joining the Accelerator, the group hopes to gain a better sense of how to streamline the process of creating a public utility; and how to create a template that could serve as a model to other agencies. Other reasons for participating, however, have to do with leveling the playing field.

Digital equity is a primary driver for Municipal Broadband PDX, which took the lead in applying to join the Accelerator. ("PDX" is the airport code for Portland International Airport, and also regularly used as a signifier of the Portland metropolitan area.) Serving the neediest is a primary mission for the county, Hanna said, but because Internet access is controlled by a for-profit industry, furthering high-speed broadband has been difficult.

"Equity was really the primary driver for Multnomah County, and for the four cities in eastern Multnomah County," said Hanna. "They quickly also joined both from an equity perspective but also from an economic development perspective. They saw the opportunity to attract and retain new businesses and kind of the local economic boom and local jobs. There's really kind of a compelling economic aspect to municipal broadband."

CONNECTIVITY, PARTNERSHIPS KEY IN VERMONT

Connectivity is a primary issue for the town of Enosburgh, Vt. But Sean Kio, chairman of the

Enosburgh Technology and Innovation Committee, said the town, which serves more than 2,700 residents in areas including the village of Enosburg Falls, has other motivations for joining the Accelerator, including a growing workforce it wants to retain, forging local partnerships, sparking creative tech work and potentially standing up a broadband network.

The quality of broadband access, provided by the private sector, can vary around the region, the chairman said, calling it “decent” in the village — which is within town boundaries — but somewhat slower in the town and elsewhere. Compounding the issue is the fact that most residents live outside the village. Joining the accelerator, Kio said, would enable the muni to explore closing its digital divide with education from partners — but also help attract and retain a younger workforce drawn by the lower cost of home ownership but seeking high-speed Internet.

“Enosburgh being a small community, not putting the town in any sort of financial burden long-term is always something to think about. I don’t think there’s a wrong answer. We’re currently in that process of looking at alternatives and what’s right for the community,” said Kio, who works for a fiber broadband company, Burlington Telecom, which provides TV, telephone and Internet to residents in Burlington, Vt.

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