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Biden's Internet Plan Pits Cities Against Dominant Carriers.

Industry has long opposed municipal broadband, but the idea has gained momentum this year with help from Washington.

After years of unhappy reliance on Comcast Corp. and other carriers, Pleasant Grove, on Utah's Wasatch Front, is turning to a new broadband option: a municipally owned company called Utopia Fiber. The choice follows a pandemic year that showed just how much households need fast, reliable internet connections for jobs, schooling, and medical care.

To reach homes that lack good service, or have none at all, President Joe Biden has proposed funding networks such as Utopia Fiber that are run by cities and nonprofits. That's not sitting well with Comcast, AT&T, Verizon Communications, and other dominant carriers, which don't like the prospect of facing subsidized competitors.

Pleasant Grove shows why established carriers might be vulnerable. With 38,000 residents, it's nestled between the Wasatch Range and the Great Salt Lake Basin, just south of Salt Lake City. When it asked residents about their broadband, almost two-thirds of respondents said they wouldn't recommend their cable service. Almost 90% wanted the city to pursue broadband alternatives.

"We could sit and wait for the private sector to do this—we just didn't really know when that would be," says City Administrator Scott Darrington. Residents have complained of slow broadband, and Utopia's fiber network holds out the promise of fast speeds that don't lag as more households log on, Darrington says. It will also reach areas not served by current providers.

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