

Build Fiber For Economic Development

Cities should adopt policies to make themselves fiber ready.

By Heather Burnett Gold / *FTTH Council Americas*

There are many reasons communities want fiber, but chief among them is that it makes their cities more livable and resilient, helps build tax bases and brings the promise of new jobs.

Governments use three major policy levers to boost economic development. First, tax policies, fiscal policies and trade policies support economic objectives such as high employment and sustainable growth. Next, governments can create and retain jobs through business finance, marketing, neighborhood development or small-business startup and development. Finally, local leaders build infrastructure and services such as highways, affordable housing, educational programs and parks.

The Fiber to the Home Council is particularly interested in the last set of policies. In years of work with communities and fiber providers, we've learned how local leaders view broadband as part of their economic development strategy.

Many of these leaders believe they can do little to improve broadband infrastructure other than beg incumbent providers or do the whole thing themselves. However, local leaders can take simple steps to make their communities broadband ready.

Construction costs account for 60 to 80 percent of a next-generation fiber broadband deployment. Governments at all levels can make these networks cheaper to deploy by making the construction process easier and faster.

Many state and local agencies have implemented "dig once" policies to encourage fiber buildouts. When new roads are built or opened for maintenance and conduit is not already in place, jurisdictions install oversized conduit banks within rights-of-way to accommodate future broadband users. Once conduit is in place, any company that wants to add fiber can route cables through it, reducing the need to tear up the streets each time a new broadband provider wants to bring service to an area. This simple, low-cost policy could cut the cost of fiber construction enormously, keep streets from being torn up multiple times and make fiber even more attractive to community members.

Many next-generation broadband deployers run cables along existing utility or telephone poles. This is usually faster and cheaper than underground trenching, but it can disturb sidewalk and road traffic, it can be noisy, and construction equipment can be an eyesore.

Too often, the process to make a pole ready works like this: A new broadband provider negotiates access to poles and then waits. One after another, the other entities that have equipment attached to those poles bring in construction crews to move their own equipment around on the poles to make way for the new deployment. This process is referred to as "make-ready." Everyone involved in the make-ready process loses: the existing users who have to move their equipment, the community residents who suffer through weeks of construction and the would-be broadband provider, which wastes money as it waits.

The Fiber to the Home Council released guidance on how to streamline make-ready policies to facilitate broadband deployments. We recommend that all government agencies adopt "one touch" make-ready policies for utility poles, which would allow a single construction crew – one that has enough skill and experience to be on an approved list and chosen by the pole owner itself – to complete all the work necessary to make a pole ready for the attachment of new equipment. This is similar to the guidance offered in the FCC's National Broadband Plan, which called for "allow[ing] prospective attachers to use independent, utility approved and certified contractors to perform all engineering assessments and communications make-ready work ... under the joint direction and supervision of the pole owner and the new attacher."

These policies reduce disruption and inconvenience while shortening wait time. They are equitable: Using an authorized contractor protects pole owners and other entities that have equipment attached to poles. In the long run, adopting these policies would make it easier for private companies to invest in Internet connectivity.

Many things every city does today – in terms of zoning, construction, permitting, rights-of-way management and other activities – will affect what kind of broadband networks it will have in 10 years. And in 10 years, whether it has faster, cheaper, better broadband networks will affect everything the city does. Every city can be and should be a fiber-ready city. ❖

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