

In this issue: Budget Process Outline

CITYSCAPE

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Expanding opportunities: Decorah's fiber optic project

DECORAH

By Mark Tomb | Iowa League of Cities

Decorah

Population: 8,127

Location: Winneshiek County,
Northeast Iowa

Did you know: Decorah is the birthplace of William Herbert Foege, an epidemiologist and former director of the Centers for Disease Control. He is credited with devising the global strategy on the eradication of smallpox and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom Award in 2012.

Around the State

The Decorah MetroNet is a million-dollar fiber optic infrastructure project that is transforming a northeast Iowa community. The project involves an intergovernmental partnership between six anchor members: the city of Decorah, Decorah Community School District, Luther College, Winneshiek County, Winneshiek Medical Center and the Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission. This unique partnership was the recipient of the League's 2014 All-Star Community Award in the category of Service Sharing. This article provides an update on the project and describes the potential for future economic development success.



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The Project

Initial planning started in 2008 as a result of area-wide flooding that exposed flaws in existing communication networks. With the growing desire for broadband Internet access and the school district's need to better connect its buildings, a partnership was forged. The Decorah MetroNet, a 28E entity, was established in 2010 to formalize the planning, construction and ongoing administration of the project. Some of the basic goals behind the formation of the partnership included service sharing, aggregated purchasing power, economic development and disaster preparedness, all of which have been accomplished by the connectivity afforded by fiber between each anchor's buildings and sites.

The 11-mile fiber optic loop project became operational in 2013 and delivers services to 17 locations throughout the community. The majority of the infrastructure costs were made possible by a Broadband Technologies Opportunity Program grant through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Each anchor organization committed \$75,000 over three years to provide the 30 percent match required for the grant. The grant only provided money for the initial infrastructure investment; ongoing infrastructure, equipment and operational costs are determined by the MetroNet Board.

Benefits

Fiber offers much more reliable speeds with a potential for reduced costs for service. Cost savings comes into play by having the wholesale buying power of the MetroNet Board being able to purchase access on the national wholesale scene rather than the local retail market. The benefits of the project also include updated phone systems and the availability to build networks with other anchors that offer network redundancy and data backup at an offsite location. Another important aspect of the fiber network will be emergency and disaster preparedness. The plug and play possibilities of a shared cloud environment allow each organization to plan for continuity of business and overall emergency preparedness.

Having fiber for the anchor group's use is a tremendous asset for the community, and by itself is worth the investment, because it helps lower costs for these member organizations and provides for more efficient operations. Now the issue becomes how to allow access to the broader community and service a demand that exists for both business and residential customers.

Creating a Public Utility

The idea of a common fiber optic network had been discussed for years by numerous anchor members of the project. Early ideas included the possibility of a municipal utility and also a discussion on how such an effort could lead to the recruitment of more technology-dependent industries with high-paying jobs.

"As with many rural areas, the need for faster and more reliable Internet access is always important, especially when considering the possibility for economic development," said Chad Bird, Decorah's city manager.

There was strong interest in the Decorah business community about the possibilities of a local fiber network. The Decorah MetroNet decided to walk before running and made the fiber fully-functional for anchor use before branching out and making it available for others on the open market. This approach allowed a more reasoned consideration of overall system needs, but it frustrated the general constituency who demanded reliable and affordable services from the market place.

The Decorah MetroNet is using less than half of the capacity of the fiber system and has affordable broadband capacities at greater than one gigabit. Starting a new telecommunications utility seemed to be one of the best approaches for the grassroots group of citizens in their quest to see fiber in each home and business. This proposition is generally fairly expensive, but plans are now moving forward to offer the service to a broader customer base in the next couple of years. This move allows the community to better capture telecommuting jobs as well as improve the service offered to existing businesses and residents.

In November 2015, Decorah voters overwhelmingly decided to give the city the authority to establish a municipal telecommunications network by a vote of 1,289 to 95. The community-led effort established a five-member Communications Utility Board of Trustees to formally explore the possibility of establishing a municipal telecommunications utility for the city. To help in that effort, the city was awarded an \$11,500 U.S. Department of Agriculture grant to help fund a feasibility study. The study is expected during 2017 with results due to the city council shortly after that time. If all goes well, it is expected that installation of a fiber-to-the-home network could begin within a year or so after.

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