

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Episode 3, “Everything’s Better with Better Broadband”

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is City Speak. I'm your host, Adriana Temali-Smith.

I'd like to start out with a question for you listeners. How are you listening to this show right now?

[podcast theme music fades out] Did you download the episode from a podcast app, or are you streaming it from the League's website? Are you listening at a computer, a desk, on your phone, while you're on the go? No matter how you answer, it's likely that all of you are using high-speed internet to access this episode. Today we're gonna talk about broadband. And I feel it's crucial to mention that this whole show, not just today's episode but everything we do here at the City Speak podcast, is made possible right now by access to reliable high-speed internet.

So let's start out with, what is broadband? Broadband is simply a way of connecting to the internet, and it's used to indicate high-speed access as opposed to that dial-up that we used to have. The FCC currently defines it as 25 megabit download and three megabit upload, but many cities across the state and even across the country are being left behind. In many areas, the current access rates are around 1,000 megabit download. Minnesota has a state goal, set by the state broadband task force, that by 2026 we want to ensure that everybody in the state has access to at least 100 megabit download and 20 megabit upload. 100 by 20 by 2026.

So here to talk about how we can help our state advance our goals around broadband, I'm joined by two individuals from the Blandin Foundation. First up is Bernadine Joselyn. Bernadine is the director of public policy & engagement. She covers a wide range of the services that Blandin offers, and one of her passions is in developing local leaders who can lead at the local level. Bill Coleman is also joining Bernadine today. He's a community broadband coach for Blandin and an independent consultant in technology-based community development. He brings over two decades of stories of success to communities around the state who are looking to increase their access and adoption around broadband issues. [Podcast theme music plays briefly and fades out]

Well, so let's start out with the Blandin Foundation. What is the Blandin Foundation and what is the organization's mission?

Bernadine Joselyn:

Blandin Foundation is Minnesota's largest rural-based philanthropic organization. We're a private foundation based in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, and our mission is to strengthen rural Minnesota communities. And Blandin Foundation's a little bit unique because in addition to what I think most people think about when they think about foundations, grant making, you know, making grants to not-for-profits and other qualifying organizations, at Blandin we really also focus on community leadership development. We think that people are any city's, any community's most important resource, and that the most generative source of ideas and change and opportunity are the people that live in a place. And so a lot of what we do at Blandin Foundation is to work on helping local leaders together as a leadership cohort get the skills and frameworks that they need to make the change that they want to see in their community.

So that's our community leadership program, and then of course we have grants, and then the work that I do, public policy and engagement, is trying to help people work together effectively on projects that matter to them. And as we're talking about today, at Blandin we recognize how critical broadband infrastructure is to community vitality.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So then could you say a little bit more about what Blandin Foundation does as it relates to broadband?

Bernadine Joselyn:

Because we care about the vitality and strength of rural places for, uh, a bunch of years now we've been caring a lot about broadband access and adoption. Because at Blandin Foundation we recognize that everything that we care about, from, you know, roads or trees or kids or schools or hospitals, is better with broadband. I like to say everything's better with broadband, everything's better with better broadband. And broadband is a topic that's kind of challenging sometimes for city officials and county officials to get their arms around, because it's, you know, it's fast-paced, it's changing a lot, it's very complicated, it's technical, and it's really hard to see sometimes the people part of it. But in the work that Blandin Foundation's been doing, we find, I like to say that technology is about 20% of the challenge and sociology, or the people part, is 80% of the challenge.

If it was profitable to have a good broadband network, they've been built. So those areas that are without it today, those cities or communities or rural places, they have to realize that unless they do something about it, it's not gonna happen. It's really up to local leaders to solve that problem. And so Blandin Foundation got involved in this work because we had a toolbox of convening, and grant funding, and leadership development, and training that could help local leaders work together to attack this really important challenge for local places that have been left behind without broadband. 'Cause it does take a lot of organization, will, collaboration, and hard work by, uh, local people in those places that have been left behind by market failure to get a network.

And we thought that was a place, if we cared about rural communities, that we could help them stay vibrant and vital into the future, because access denied is opportunity denied, and we want to be sure that our rural places can fully participate in the modern economy.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

What sort of a landscape do we have across the state right now in terms of how many communities do not have good access to broadband?

Bill Coleman:

For the most part, if you're in a city of 500 people or 1,000 people, you probably have, uh, internet that meets the state goal. 'Cause, uh, most cable modem providers, your cable companies, provide services that meet that 100 by 20 goal.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bill Coleman:

But when we think about the lack of broadband, primarily that's out in the rural countryside. And then I would say more of the very, very small hamlets of under 500 people that, uh, might not have a cable television provider. But I think there's about 20% of the people now in the state that don't meet the state goal. Uh, especially in the rural countryside, broadband can be expensive when people are trying to use satellite or fixed wireless.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bill Coleman:

Some telecom providers, their prices are quite, uh, high compared to places where there's competition, more dense, uh, development. And so that affordability is a challenge there as well.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about what the role of the organization is as you work with communities and, and cities who want to get started in making broadband a core part of quality of life and access to broadband in their city.

Bernadine Joselyn:

At Blandin Foundation we work at a couple different levels. So we work statewide, because we recognize a policy context and the need for public investment in this infrastructure. We've been talking about the fact that we have a very uneven service environment in Minnesota, and it's really driven by, you know, the economics of the network, right? The density of people and how profitable or not that network is gonna be for providers. We recognize the need to have a voice of, uh, real broadband advocates at the state level, so the Foundation has been really proud and gratified to work with broadband advocates from across the state to help stand up, um, a now very robust Minnesota rural broadband coalition that, um, is eager for memberships of, uh, cities and counties. They have lots of participation from across the state.

So we work at the state level to try to support and encourage rural people to bring their perspectives and their experience to St. Paul, so that when decisions are made about public investments that their perspectives are recognized. But most of the work we do is really at the community level.

Bill Coleman:

We have a couple different ways of working with communities. One is in a very ad hoc way to meet communities where they are, generally in pursuit of better broadband services. So we have a program called Community Broadband Resources, uh, communities can apply for up to 32 hours of technical assistance that I provide. And I really help a community get organized, to form a steering team, to look at the existing broadband services and set of providers.

To help educate the community leaders about the issue, some of the nuances of getting broadband providers to invest. It's very much an economic development program in essence, as you're trying to get a private-sector company to invest in your community, to build that infrastructure and provide service. We do a lot of that work to help communities just get organized and educate the leaders. The second approach is a much more in-depth, uh, effort that takes place over 18 to 24 months, where we, uh, have Blandin broadband communities. And we bring this whole, more of a holistic concept of broadband access and use through something called the intelligent community model, essentially that on a base of broadband, how do you build a knowledge workforce, spur innovation, address digital inclusion, provide sustainability, and then engage in community engagement using technology as the platform for that.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Let's take a quick break to hear from a member of the League's Business Leadership Council.

Message from a member of the League's Business Leadership Council:

[Music] WSB is a design and consulting firm. We partner with clients to create what's next in infrastructure. Thank you to everyone who helps us build for tomorrow today. [Music ends]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay, let's get back with the show. So let's talk about city leaders. You do quite a lot of work with cities and communities across the state. What are you seeing or hearing from city officials as it relates to the need for infrastructure and how to begin a broadband project?

Bill Coleman:

In some cities where they have average broadband service, they now see themselves surrounded by rural townships that have gigabit fiber to the home networks. And the cities are feeling left behind. Grant dollars that pay for the rural fiber are not available to already-served cities. Communities also have lots of need for fiber optic networks themselves to support smart city applications. Sewer and water systems, traffic and street lighting, and public safety. They might also want to position themselves to attract high technology businesses to their downtowns and industrial parks, and even to, uh home businesses. Cities can build and own networks then lease access to one or more ISPs that can offer the retail services, or they can offer those services themselves. Although increasingly we're seeing this bifurcated model where the cities, uh, own the networks but then, uh, lease them out, pay somebody else to, to manage and then sell services.

Some cities are setting up systems where residents volunteer to buy into a publicly-owned network, and the cities then build into the neighborhoods, or fiberhoods, if you will, when enough people sign up. We see that communities that have three wired providers, a cable company and a phone company traditionally, and then a third, uh, entry doing fiber to the home. The prices then for bundled services in those communities is significantly cheaper than it is in places where there's just one or two providers. If you can get small and nimble ISPs ready to serve customers over a publicly-owned network, that's really a great way to provide services in communities. And I think we're starting to see that now in communities, and I think that's gonna be more and more of a trend as we go forward.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, earlier on Bernadine mentioned that sometimes there can be an obstacle around people with this work, you called it sociology challenge, which I enjoyed. Um, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about the obstacles that are faced in advocating for border-to-border broadband.

Bernadine Joselyn:

I, I hope it doesn't sound too nerdy, but I actually think that the foundational obstacle for, in advocating for border to border broadband is cynicism and apathy. I think that hope and vision and tenacity and leadership are really the critical ingredients. We see at Blandin Foundation that local leadership matters. And those communities where people have the vision and the hope and the sense of possibility to come together and work on advocating on their own behalf, make a difference. I mean, money's important, right, it does take money to build and fund a network for sure.

But very upstream of any kind of project is people believing that it's possible and imagining a different future. I think it's important, too, for city officials and government officials to be ambitious in their hopes for their community, and to not settle for what's good enough. You know, when you're thinking about infrastructure, it's kind of like a marriage. You want to have a partner that is gonna be, you know, a good partner for the long haul. It's not like a prom date.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Right.

Bernadine Joselyn:

You know, somebody that is good enough for tonight. City officials have an important role to play in looking around their communities to find those champions, encourage them to come together. And you're gonna find them in librarians, in chamber officials, and economic development officials. And even in, in,

you know, bankers, we've seen leadership come from all kinds of places in community. People that are looking to the future and want to ensure that their place continues to be a vibrant place to live and do work.

Bill Coleman:

I think one of the biggest issues in cities is the fallacy that the broadband network is so expensive. So to build in a community, a fiber to home network, the prices might be \$3000 to \$4,000 per home to build a state-of-the-art fiber network. And we know that a fiber network in a community adds an average of about 3% to the value of a home. And the beautiful thing about public involvement in building in, uh, these networks is that a fiber network can be financed over 10 or 15 or 20 years. And so if you think about the cost of, uh, building that network at three to \$4,000 spread over, uh, 10 years, you know, that's only three to \$400 per year of cost to build that network. With the increased competition in a broadband marketplace, most community members would save money based on the prices they're paying for telecom services compared to a, uh, special assessment or just addition to a levy. There should be real motivation by city leaders to engage in this kind of broadband infrastructure investment.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So I've already heard some great advice for city leaders, but I want to wrap up our conversation by asking, what advice do you have for those city leaders who are out there wanting to make a difference around broadband in their city?

Bernadine Joselyn:

Yeah, so I think that recognizing the importance and the role of leadership commitment to this and making it a priority is a really important first step. I think my advice is, start now. I think the first thing to do is to recognize it as a priority and then look for who your partners are. Find the broadband champions in your community. And, and then the third piece of advice I would have is tenacity, right? Stick with it. This is for the long haul. We are, people are building on the shoulders of folks that have come before, most of the communities that have been working on this have been at it for a while, and so you got to gird your loins and be prepared for the long battle. So, uh, start now, get a team, and stick with it.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's great advice. Bill, did you have anything you wanted to add?

Bill Coleman:

10 years ago or even five years ago, community leaders that were talking about broadband and trying to improve their local networks were way ahead of their constituents. Today I think our leaders need to follow what their community members want. They want better internet services. And so I don't think there's really much political risk for community leaders that want to really engage and invest in a broadband infrastructure investment. They're gonna find their community members are with them. They're gonna see that there's a lot of support for better internet service, for an active role in local government in making that happen, and again, this is a problem that can be addressed, can be fixed. Well, I just think that there's a lot of opportunity for city leaders to catch up with their own constituents and, uh, to address the broadband issue.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Here at City Speak we like to wrap up [podcast theme music fades out] by reflecting on the important lessons our guests bring us. I'm not gonna lie, I approached this conversation today thinking that I would be overwhelmed by the technical aspects of broadband infrastructure. But actually, what I heard and the

lessons that I'm taking away are much more on people and on leadership rather than those technical skills. I loved what Bernadine said about being ambitious with your hope for your city. As a city official, I think that that is part and parcel of the job description, but something that we need to be reminded of.

I also loved the fact that you need to look for leaders everywhere. They might be in your bank, or in your library, or in your schools, and you need those local leaders, those champions, to be on board. Build up that leadership team. And then the third thing that I really loved was that notion that this work is long work. I think it was mentioned that you should think of this as a marriage and not just a prom date, which is something I'm gonna take with me as a metaphor to use in many instances, but certainly here. It's not an overnight project. This is something, if you're a city council person setting out to bring broadband infrastructure to your city, recognize that this is going to be long work, that you're probably gonna need to balance your motivation levels for the long haul, and think about what's gonna keep you going as you do this work.

That's it for our show today. I want to thank Bernadine Joselyn, I want to thank Bill Coleman, and I want to thank the Blandin Foundation for the wonderful time that they spent with me this morning. And I should say, the show was brought to you by broadband infrastructure. We recorded this over Zoom today, uh, and we wouldn't have been able to do so had the three of us not all had good internet connection.

[Podcast theme music begins] I also want to thank you, the listeners, for listening to City Speak. A reminder that episodes are released regularly and are posted on the League's website and via Twitter. You can find us on iTunes, Google Play Music, and other podcast applications. And if you have an idea for an episode, general feedback, or just want to get in touch, connect with us at podcast@lmc.org. Until next time, take care.

[Podcast theme music ends]