

Fiber-Optic Internet to the Home

1000 words

Rauf Bolden, Orange Beach

August 24, 2017

Fiber-Optic Internet to the Home

High-Speed or Gigabit Internet defines your quality of life, more than your car, your house, your clothes or your jewelry, allowing you to connect and stay connected with your family or business from the other side of the world, but there's a catch.

The late Councilman Al Bradley of Orange Beach believed in fiber-to-the-home. He espoused a municipality on its own fiber ring, connecting each home to high-speed Internet, making the quality-of-life for residents better. Providing local children with online-educational opportunities is vital. This binds the community together.

Fiber-optic is a tiny-glass conduit capable of transmitting pulses of light, converted to data for Internet and phones by "mysterious-black boxes". The speeds with which fiber delivers these services is always expanding, defining top-tier Internet.

People should have high-speed connectivity in their homes, like electric lights and indoor plumbing. Internet is a necessity not a luxury and fiber is the best solution, connecting our lives to our families in ways that were unimaginable ten years ago.

Conceptualizing fiber-to-the-home requires imagination, ingenuity and commitment, creating solutions in underserved neighborhoods, ingeniously routing traffic for cost efficiencies, dedicating capital where it is most needed.

Alabama Law speaks to Municipal Broadband (*State Laws Restricting Municipal Broadband*, Alabama Code 11-50B et.seq.), "Public providers wanting to offer telecommunications services must conduct a public hearing and hold an election. Service can only be provided within the utilities territory. Local taxes or other funds may not be used to pay for expenses."

Ideally, a municipality is not the local provider. Partnering with a fiber operator is essential, presenting a public-private partnership to the residents, endorsing the partner's role as customer-service component for installation, billing and repairs.

I respectfully suggest defining the city's role as financial accomplice, simply paying \$2 million for the build out, sharing in the profits over 50 years, and recouping the taxpayers' investment with a guaranteed-bonus percentage.

Legal guidance and planning are crucial for a successful-fiber deployment. The developer is considered a "telecommunications carrier" if he lights the fiber himself or leases it to a third party, falling under Federal FCC jurisdiction, specifically the Telecommunications Act of 1934, according to the Law Offices of Michael L. Glaser L.L.C. on the Telecoms Attorneys web site.

Plans are measured by their effectiveness. The fiber provider must give up monthly customer-call reports, what happened, how was the issue resolved, how long to resolution, and any added costs to residents if repairs were needed. This is diligent-municipal oversight.

Fiber-Optic Internet to the Home

“5.25 million American Homes are now connected to a fiber network,” according to a Public Policy Paper by the Fiber-to-the-Home Council. Fiber cities include: Bristol, VA; Dalton, GA; Chelan County, WA; Grant County, WA; Jackson, TN; Kutztown, PA; and Reedsburg, WI.

I contacted the Mayors’ Offices of Dalton, Georgia and Jackson, Tennessee via email. Their reps did not return my request for comment.

Price is a key issue, establishing a sale point that is comparable to DSL or Cable is optimal. The Utility Board of the City of Sylacauga, Alabama with 12,000 residents, offering fiber-to-the-home, presenting a price structure from \$70 - \$500 per month, according to their website. This pricing reflects the true cost to residents in Sylacauga, having fiber reliability and faster speeds to their homes.

“The Utilities Board of the City of Sylacauga is the sole provider. We are a gigabit city and we offer service within our electric service area and a few areas outside of same. We bring the service to customers on demand. We did not run fiber to every brick and mortar hoping for a subscription,” said Reay Culp, Network Administrator for the Utilities Board of the City of Sylacauga in an email.

Political capital is hard won, spending it on a venture that may not be perceived as essential is a risk, requiring education, town-halls and patience, convincing residents to sign up, is harder still.

Politicians pushing for fiber-to-the-home are taking a chance, being the voice for innovation, especially when residents cannot see a brick-and-mortar structure reflecting the city’s investment. Assuming taxpayer money went into the cloud is not what elected officials want their constituents to think.

The true hazard is caution, seeing an opportunity and not focusing on owning it, calculating risk-reward opportunities is what strategic planners must be seen to be able to do. Fiber-to-the-home is a financial risk, generating huge quality-of-life returns for constituents.

“The number of hours Americans spend watching video over the Internet has grown 70% since June 2010 (Nielsen) Revenues from online video services grew by 175% between 2010-2012, from \$1.86 billion to \$5.12 billion (SNL Kagan). Real-time streaming of entertainment in prime time grew from 42.7% of downloads in 2010 to 67% by Sept. 2013 (Sandvine Global Internet Phenomena Report)”, according to Fiber-to-the-Home’s web site.

Caught between action and inaction, some will chose inaction as a safe course through the reef, postponing the fiber-to-the-home decision until later, simply kicking the can down the road.

Living-in-denial of the need for better connectivity will only result in cable operators generating more dissatisfied reviews, DSL operators continuing to enrage residents because of poor service, forcing cellular carriers with a reliable but very expensive service to find ways to fill the void with small cells, leaving elected officials looking like they are not doing enough about complaints. None of these scenarios generates feelings of happiness in the community.

I support the vision of our late Councilman Al Bradley, believing a municipality is better served by being connected to fiber-optic Internet in every home, municipal building and school.

Fiber-Optic Internet to the Home

Not investing in fiber-to-the-home places the community at a disadvantage, as you watch others innovate, letting economic opportunities pass you by. That's the catch.

ENDS.