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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community Broadband Snapshot Reports are just that, a snapshot taken at a moment in time to get a sense of what are main issues regarding community broadband: digital literacy, federal and state policies, funding issues, business models, and so forth.

The surveys of economic development professionals started in 2006 in partnership with the International Economic Development Council (IEDC). Philadelphia made national headlines in 2004 by proposing to build a citywide Wi-Fi network to 1) provide Internet access to low-income people and 2) save millions of dollars annually by switching 2,000 city employees to the network. Soon it seemed every US mayor was proposing to do the same.

The technology hype machine coupled with politicians’ egos, however, created absurd national expectations that neither Wi-Fi technology and economic realities were capable of delivering. The annual surveys provided reality checks that people needed.

Now, COVID-19 is a thread that runs through many discussions of broadband and the various digital technologies that broadband enables as we pull our local economies back from the brink. Community broadband – networks owned by municipalities, wireless ISPs, and co-ops – has come a long way since the municipal wifi dream. There’s still a need for reality checks.

In this year’s survey, 200 recipients weighed in on the state of broadband, starting with an assessment of ISP competition as well as broadband alternative to the giant ISPs for communities. This report concludes with some insights and advice for how we can continue to leverage community broadband.

This year, economic development professionals participated from across the U.S. to provide insights and observations.

- Has COVID-19 set back broadband advance as well as hopes of closing the digital divide?
- Respondents have a markedly increased interest in telehealth as a local economic tool this year than they had 18 months ago.
- Some survey participants have witnessed the influence broadband had on low-income and unemployed workers becoming entrepreneurs before and after COVID-19 struck.
- Respondent weighed in on the impacts of COVID-19 on the determinants of economic development.
- Federal and state broadband policies and funding rules work to the detriment of local communities.
- Ultimately, what are the roles of broadband and digital technologies when COVID-19 is done with us?

In partnership with IEDC, and this year with business intelligence firm SizeUp, as well as sponsor ETI Software, we’ve worked together to bring you this report.
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

The bulk of the respondents were economic development departments within local and state governments (31%) and economic development agencies (32%) of cities, towns, and counties. There were community foundations and other nonprofits (21%) dedicated to economic development. The rest were split between economic development consulting firms (7%) and general nonprofit organizations (9%).

1. Position

- President/Sr Staff: 50.5%
- Manager: 17.8%
- Elected official: 5.0%
- General staff: 15.8%
- Consultant: 10.9%

Presidents and senior staff of these organizations were 51% of these organizations. 19% of respondents are in manager positions and general staff account for 16%. 10% of respondents are economic development consultants. There was a sprinkling of respondents from nearly every state with Florida (5%), Indiana (7%) and Texas (9%) being the top participating states.

Most of the respondents are from counties 40% and 27% hail from cities and towns. 22% of participants come from regions within the state. 22% of them serve jurisdictions with between 100,000 and 300,000 citizens and 17% serve populations between 5,000 and 25,000. There are about 30% economic developers from jurisdictions with between 25,000 and 100,000 people.

Reflecting IEDC’s members who are predominantly from rural communities, there are 41% who classify their communities as rural, 13% work for rural/suburban communities, and 25% classify their jurisdictions as a combination of urban, suburban and rural.

THE STATE OF BROADBAND

Any discussion about the state of broadband generally starts with a question, how competitive is the city or county? By “competitive” I mean, a local market where two or three Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that *actually compete* with each other effectively enough to keep Internet prices low and quality high. Having five or six ISPs that collectively have 10% market share isn’t competition when an AT&T has 85%.
47% of economic development professionals surveyed recognize that they have a duopoly situation in which there is one big telecom and one big cable company competing against each other only on paper, thus keeping prices high and services bad. Another 18% are under a monopoly, one predominant telecom or one cable provider.

10% of respondents feel that at least local businesses have the benefit of a competitive ISP market. In midsize and larger cities there’s probably enough large-customer accounts that the market can support – and encourage – true competition between ISPs. For the last two surveys similar results for those respondents that have two or more ISPs keeping prices low, we see a slight increase from 26% in 2019 to 28% in 2021.

WISPs and co-ops

Wireless ISPs’ prominence on the broadband landscape (49% of jurisdictions have WISPs) is due in part to nearly three decades of rural growth starting in Wyoming in 1992. Currently there are over 2500 WISPs, of which about 10% of those are in urban cities. They are likely more since 25% of survey respondents don’t know for sure if a WISP is in their jurisdiction.

Mike Wendy, Director of Communications at the WISP association (WISPA) believes members deliver a lot of out-of-the-box thinking. “Let’s say there's an office complex that's been abandoned and it doesn't have connectivity,” he says. “The community may decide it needs a ‘overflow center’ if regular hospitals fill up because of COVID-19, or they need temporary space for treating itinerant workers. A WISP can go out there and in two days provide broadband service for telehealth.”

“Wireless is the way to go in urban areas,” says Brad Hine, Product Director – GIS & Analytics Solutions for ETI Software Solutions. “You want to deliver services to dense areas of people who collectively need massive broadband to get video, high-bandwidth images, and video streaming. At the same time, I’m not really sure that 5G technology is ready for the market yet. I wonder if maybe it's another five to 10 years out.”
14% surveyed say they have co-ops offering broadband, and 7% of respondents say co-ops plan to build broadband networks soon.

The 900 rural electric co-ops have a century lead on WISPs, but only since 2013 have they offered broadband services. Community activists Institute of Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) reports that co-ops provide electricity to about 12 percent of the U.S. population distributed over nearly 2 million square miles. 90 rural electric co-ops have embarked on fiber optic projects to increase Internet access for their members.

Telephone co-ops have a 15-year head start on electric co-ops. ILSR reports, “There are about 260 telephone cooperatives in the United States. Many provide Internet service as a natural extension of their existing infrastructure. Many started out by providing dial-up and DSL services, but only recently have begun to transition to fiber-to-the-home. Some have already transitioned to an all-fiber network, having upgraded everyone in their territory to fiber.”
Public Networks

For jurisdictions that have or are planning public networks in 2021, 8% hope to build a wired network, 5% are building a wireless network and 8% are building a hybrid wireless/wired network. This collective 21% is an increase from 15% in 2019 that had or planned to build a public network. 47% of respondents said public broadband is off in the future. Maybe.

More municipalities are considering wireless given advancements made in the technology plus changes demanded by COVID-19 needed quick deployment. Generally, not too many mayors want to tear up the streets in urban areas to lay a lot of fiber Covid emergency broadband funds has to be spent in a hurry. Strategically placed fiber can power Wi-Fi and fixed wireless networks in neighborhoods until they can fund fiber.

In terms of business models, public-private partnerships lead the pack with 43% of jurisdictions' first choice. A quarter of respondents say they prefer municipal government or public utility own and operate their networks, and 27% prefer a public entity own the infrastructure and a private company sell and manage the broadband services.

This year I wanted more details on the planning for “limited-reach” public networks, meaning, networks confined to specific parts of the city or town. Respondents could pick any number of answers. 63% of respondents indicated they are building these networks in anchor institutions such as schools, libraries, or government buildings.
47% and 48% respondents respectively want limited-reach networks in commercial districts and downtown areas. Limited-reach networks also are targeted to residential areas for 40% of jurisdictions. I expect that further digging would reveal that these are low-income homes where incumbents won’t build.

General broadband issues

The leading headlines for the first month of the pandemic: **50% of K-12 School Kids Don’t Have Internet At Home, Homework Gap Widens!** Reality was worse. 23% of survey respondents indeed estimated half of kids in their jurisdictions have Internet at home. But another 32% of respondents feel less than 40% of their students have adequate broadband at home. Home broadband availability for all ages have similar percentages.

Only 10% of respondents feel they have enough nonprofits and government agencies providing digital inclusion resources, including broadband training, digital literacy, and technology adoption programs. These resources come after broadband connections are made. 47% of survey respondents find that there are some levels of digital inclusion but they need more. 43% don’t know for sure.

In past years, I asked survey participants if they used broadband to drive entrepreneurialism within low-income communities. 22% this year still strongly supports this strategy, and plus 30% believe the initiative demands supporting programs such as teaching the basics of business accounting and marketing. Another 25% believe this strategy “maybe” will work.

After COVID-19 quite a few people lost their jobs or suffered reduced hours, so a logical question is, can broadband drive people to become entrepreneurs regardless of prior economic status? 33% believe this can happen, but again, there are 29% who feel there has to be appropriate support programs for initiative to bear great fruit.
COVID-19 AND DETERMINANTS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

This section looks at how COVID-19 is affecting what I call the determinant of economic development – those activities that push the economic success for a community. Determinants that respondents feel were negatively affected by the pandemic include unemployment numbers (71% respondents), companies’ ability to transact business (68%), 12-K education (66%), and access to healthcare (57%).

It's hard to find determinants that were positively impacted by the virus, but 56% feel that COVID has positive impacts on telecommuting and home offices. Workers reduced gas and other commute expenses, reduced traffic and smog, and lowered stress level. 38% of respondents feel positive about recruiting homeowners to the community, what's touted as the urban migration back to the country for various reasons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>determinant</th>
<th>AFFECTING NEGATIVELY (1)</th>
<th>LITTLE OR NO AFFECT (2)</th>
<th>IMPACTING POSITIVELY (3)</th>
<th>CURRENTLY CANNOT TELL (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to broadband</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to healthcare</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effecting commercial rents</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effecting companies ability to do business</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effecting residential rents</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enable telecommuting/home offices</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-12 education/distance learning</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting homeowners to the community</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment numbers</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While 47% view the access to broadband is taking a severe hit and being negatively affected, 24% view COVID’s impact on broadband as a positive thing. It could be because of the huge amounts of federal CARES grant money because of COVID that went into broadband in a short period of time and had to be spent by the end of the year.

It was interesting that 48% of respondents felt that the pandemic had neither little or no effect on residential rents. Many urban areas experience some drop rental rates because employees are taking advantage of freedom to work from home to move to areas with cheaper rent. College towns likely have a similar rent dynamic. Many colleges switched to online classes, so students went back home rather than incurring college apartment rent.
Telehealth

The 2019 survey was my first in-depth look at various telehealth activities and how these activities might impact local economies. IEDC members weighed in on seven telehealth activities that may or may not impact local economies. About a third of respondents consistently answered, “Not sure, but it’s worth studying.”

There was a marked increase this year in support for telehealth as an economic development tool as I asked six of the seven questions again. It’s probable most participants experienced telehealth up close and personal in 2020. Surely they have read many articles on the topic.

41% of respondents feel attracting more healthcare professionals to the community impacts local economies, whereas 26% believed so in 2019. 39% feel telehealth reducing ER visits is a significant economic benefit, while 24% felt similarly in 2019. Having more mental healthcare services stay local is a strong benefit for 32% of respondents, but just 24% said so in 2019.

What a difference a year makes

Attract medical research grants. The Web is filled with info about medical research grants. Any grants for millions of dollars should have a notable impact on some local businesses and job creation.

More mental healthcare services stay local. “There are 65 million Americans that have diagnosable mental health illness but we have less than half of the psychiatric providers needed to meet that demand,” says Encounter Telehealth CEO Jennifer Amis. According to a Scientific American blog, depression in America costs society $210 billion annually. For every dollar spent treating depression, $4.70 is spent treating related illnesses and $1.90 is spent for lost work productivity and suicide.

Keeping seniors living at home longer. Telehealth could enable seniors to add years to their ability to stay in their homes or possibly move to a nearby senior facility. This will keep a community’s senior ecosystem active, and seniors can still maintain a social and economic role within the community. Telehealth will be another incentive to attract seniors who are looking for a change from the urban lifestyle but want to maintain easy access to healthcare.
Reduce unnecessary visits to the ER. “The average cost of an ER visit is $1,200 and comes with an average wait time of four hours or longer,” stated a 2015 BlueCross BlueShield of North Carolina newsletter. “A recent study indicated that treating many of these ER non-emergencies at urgent care or retail clinics could save $4.4 billion.” Possibly big savings for the community and government.

Slowing the impact of hospital closings. Both urban and rural hospital closings hit poor communities hardest. Deploying telehealth kiosks at food banks and homeless shelters is a good strategy for delivering physical and or mental health services. Office space is becoming more available as more working at home becomes permanent, so consider converting these offices into telehealth facilities for those sick enough to be in a hospital but not needing critical care.

Attracting doctors, medical professionals to our community. There are not enough specialists in certain healthcare professions, especially working in rural and low-income urban communities areas. The economic viability of certain communities depends heavily on the presence of healthcare professionals. 26% of survey respondents feel this would have a definite impact on the local economy, and 36% are willing to test the assumption.

Survey participants also were asked about telehealth in schools to treat both students and parents. 55% feel this is a “quality of life” issue while 27% believe this directly impacts the economy. As more schools get telehealth and reduce absenteeism due to colds, flu, etc., the economic benefit should become stronger.

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation study, 39% of working moms miss work to care for their sick children, 33% share the responsibility with their spouse, 16% call someone to help, and 6% report their partner takes time off. 60% of those who take time off to take care of the children don’t get paid.

Targeting low-income populations has a strong economic benefit, according to respondents. 34% strongly believe using telehealth to deliver more and better healthcare to low-income communities is beneficial. But to get maximum economic benefit, another 24% feel the right support programs are required. 34% feel that targeting low-income communities is only a quality of life issue.
UNPOPULAR FEDERAL POLICY DECISIONS

When it comes to broadband, telehealth, and various other digital technologies, policy and grant decisions made in Washington DC or the statehouses can hinder economic success at the local level. This section addresses five critical policy issues.

One of the most insidious policies that have been sanctioned and sanctified by giant telecom and cable companies is the prohibition and sell services. 21 states passed varying degrees of prohibitions against public utility-owned broadband networks. These prohibitions were written by incumbents’ lobbyists and activated by friendly legislators.

COVID-19 has changed the political dynamics. State legislators value their constituents’ needs (and fear their wrath) as the political tide shifts. By a solid majority, 69% of survey participants, lined up behind those calling for “increased local control of broadband networks and policy.”

To deploy broadband in towns, cities, and counties, local governments, private ISPs, contractors and so forth have to deploy fiber, wireless radios, etc. Much of this broadband gear sits on and crosses over public lands. Rights to cross over or park on this land (called “right of way” or ROW) are sources of much contention between incumbents and local officials.

Respondents were asked should there be a drive to “return local right-of-way rules.” For several years incumbents have been trying to centralized control of ROW rules in the statehouses rather than the cities and counties.

73% of survey respondents say it’s worth fighting for the return of local control over ROW. For local governments want fair market prices for ROW fees from incumbents, control over what kind of broadband is deployed, constituents rates, and franchise agreements terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WOULDN'T AFFECT MUCH (1)</th>
<th>WORTH FIGHTING FOR (2)</th>
<th>POSSIBLE DISASTER (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broadband grant parity</td>
<td>21% 27</td>
<td>52% 67</td>
<td>27% 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadband speed policy</td>
<td>23% 6</td>
<td>73% 19</td>
<td>4% 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital redlining?</td>
<td>17% 21</td>
<td>75% 94</td>
<td>9% 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROW rules</td>
<td>16% 20</td>
<td>73% 90</td>
<td>11% 13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Digital redlining - the creating and perpetuating inequities among marginalized groups specifically through their use of digital technologies, digital content, and the Internet. Though heavily associated with urban communities, rural areas are not immune.

Respondents are negative toward redlining. Help is coming as dozens of organizations have asked the incoming Biden FCC to directly confront digital redlining.

“Should federal broadband grants for broadband urban areas increase?” Currently billions of dollars in federal grants are given predominately to rural areas, but there mainly is a weak subsidy program for urban areas and a comparative small amount of federal grants. 52% of respondents favor grant parity between urban and rural.
The need for speed

Consumer and business groups are bringing a lot of pressure to the FCC to raise the speed that defines broadband from the 25 Mbps download/3 Mbps upload to something along the lines of 100 Mbps symmetrical (same speed download and upload). Today's customers are accessing 100 Mbps fiber connections, 1 Gbps and 10 Gbps.

The last survey I did with IEDC, I created a grid to show what economic developers feel are the best broadband speeds based on specific types of economic outcomes. No doubt COVID-19 changed some of these estimates but I needed to be mindful of how much time these participants had to put in already for the survey.

“Consider speed trends that are happening today,” states Pete Pizzutillo, Vice President of ETI Software. “Home workers’ needs continue to grow, demanding sophisticated tools that increase bandwidth.” A lot of people are leaving big cities and moving to smaller towns. Millennials along with the pandemic up-ended are frustrated and turning to entrepreneurialism. “What trends are shaping your broadband needs?” asks Pizzutillo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attract new big and mid-size businesses</th>
<th>10-12 MBSP</th>
<th>25-50 MBPS</th>
<th>100-120 MBPS</th>
<th>500 MBPS</th>
<th>1 GIGABIT OR MORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2% 3</td>
<td>17% 34</td>
<td>31% 62</td>
<td>21% 42</td>
<td>29% 57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attract new small biz/start-ups</td>
<td>1% 2</td>
<td>23% 46</td>
<td>38% 76</td>
<td>19% 37</td>
<td>19% 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve current companies’ business operations</td>
<td>2% 3</td>
<td>23% 45</td>
<td>38% 75</td>
<td>19% 38</td>
<td>19% 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enable telecommuting/home offices</td>
<td>2% 4</td>
<td>24% 47</td>
<td>40% 80</td>
<td>19% 38</td>
<td>15% 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revive communities</td>
<td>3% 6</td>
<td>18% 35</td>
<td>43% 84</td>
<td>23% 46</td>
<td>13% 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruit homeowners to the community</td>
<td>2% 3</td>
<td>27% 54</td>
<td>40% 79</td>
<td>20% 40</td>
<td>12% 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enable libraries to offer max service</td>
<td>3% 6</td>
<td>19% 38</td>
<td>43% 84</td>
<td>15% 30</td>
<td>20% 39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
YOU NEED A PLAN, STAN

This year I dug a little deeper into how the professionals are planning to use broadband to advance their economic development goals. 21% have plans in place for doing this, and 47% are working on plans. Over the years there’s been a consistent 25% of professionals who don’t have a broadband plan, likely because it’s not part of the respondents’ role, or their jurisdiction can’t afford/don’t want to do broadband.

It seems that to get the planning done, many respondents partner with some combination of government entities (city, council of governments), 2) a nonprofit economic development entity, or 3) a private organization such as a telecom or data center company. The overwhelming majority (66%) of the funding for broadband planning comes from a combination of public and private funding. A small number (12%) use solely public funds.

Where do we grow now

At the conclusion of the survey, economic professionals were asked a final question. Long term, will broadband and other digital technologies play a major role in your local economy once we get back to "normal," and if so, how? Respondents also could address questions in other parts of the survey."

These unfiltered comments at the end surveys gives report readers additional insights into the challenges and opportunities that community broadband face.

"[Broadband is] Vital, Vital, Vital......please pursue legislation and funding to go with it."

“While billions of dollars are available for infrastructure development through various grant programs the parameters of accessing funding are restrictive."

“More people are working remotely and many will continue to do so. Some moved to the region to get out of the big cities and are getting involved in their new communities. Access remains a problem in the rural parts of the region and to some degree in parts of the cities."

“Our parish/county has huge potential for growth and has a team forward thinking and building plans. These aspects in place would open potential growth in almost all areas."

“Open access broadband infrastructure (fiber) needs to be deployed in rural and urban areas in a comprehensive and ubiquitous fashion. Only then can we have holistic connectivity and access for all residents and businesses that can scale with increased demands."
**OBSERVATIONS**

1. One of the main messages inferred by a number of economic developers is that the communities with broadband problems, the communities lacking broadband, and those that have benefited by community broadband demand a role funding federal broadband solutions! The process by which we map, allocate, manage and account for broadband spending by incumbents is a travesty.

Survey numbers reflect populations trapped under duopolies and monopolies. How great the broadband picture is for rural and urban communities (particularly the low-income and impoverished residents) largely depends upon how effectively communities can create competition, either by public entities or private WISPs and co-ops. Follow Arkansas’ and Washington state’s examples.

The Arkansas governor signed the bill this year significantly reducing barriers to municipal broadband. Currently, Public Utility Districts (PUDs) in Washington state can’t sell broadband directly to consumers or organizations. State House Bill 1336 was introduced to remove these restrictions, allow PUD to sell outside their existing territory, and can construct broadband infrastructure for federally recognized tribes.

2. “There’s a reason ‘broadband is a super-determinant of public health,” says Dr. Bento Lobo, an economist who has researched extensively broadband’s, telehealth’s, and public health’s economic impact. “By having a 10 GB fiber network in his home office, Dr. Jim Busch and the other radiologists together at Diagnostic Radiology Consultants (DRC) save $18.2 million a year in time,” says Dr. Lobo. “The typical radiologist saves a thousand hours a year.”

Dr. Lobo conducted a 10-year study of Chattanooga’s public fiber network, which has led to $2.69 billion in economic benefits including creating efficiencies in medical care. Current metrics make it possible for hospitals to assess how different technologies such as broadband speeds and artificial intelligence (AI) can impact or streamline treatments. “In a wider public health sense, cities and counties could tap into that hospital data to create public databases to facilitate community health,” says Dr. Lobo.

3. Pay attention to where cities and towns deploy limited-reach public networks because these locations drive broadband deployment throughout communities. While we see COVID-19 turning healthcare and education delivery on its head, these networks can be foundations on which the two industries establish new delivery points.

Limited-reach networks can transform anchor institutions such as libraries and schools into new telehealth delivery points. Telehealth and education nonprofits can consider “adopting” public housing facilities and deliver network services to the underserved. Community centers and abandoned office buildings can have these networks create worker spaces, temporary hospitals and after-school study halls.
4. Don Sidlowski, is a former civic/government strategist for the Northwoods Broadband Economic Development Coalition in northern Wisconsin. In an interview several years ago, he stated economic development is mostly local and subsequently economic expectation should be established locally.

“A lot of the organizations doing economic analysis and creating or influencing broadband policy come from big cities and bring only big-city perspectives to solutions they recommend,” stated Sidlowski. “For example, they measure broadband success as a company bringing in hundreds of jobs to an area. For us, a company’s bringing 10 jobs has a major impact. Or having a dozen senior executives move here because of good connectivity and then spend thousands of dollars with local businesses.”

5. Though nearly 50% of survey respondents are working on their plans to leverage broadband in a bigger way to advance their economic development goals, it seems that economic developers are a little late getting to the party - until COVID-19 hit. Anatalio Ubalde, CEO of business intelligence firm SizeUp, “Urban communities probably thought, ‘We have high-speed Internet so we’re okay.’ But actually urban broadband is much worse than rural but for different reasons. In urban areas there’s the issue that people can’t afford it.”

Layered onto this is the assumption that the private sector will simply take care of the inequalities. “There is some truth to this but the other truth is that in many markets access to broadband is a monopoly or duopoly,” Ubalde adds. Digital redlining by incumbents only makes the digital divide worse.

6. Industries may want to consider encouraging or enticing their way into a market by building that town’s or community’s broadband networks. Structure a deal that enables a company to use broadband to promote or actually deliver its products or services. I was walking near the University of California Berkeley though there weren’t many students there. Yet food places were still doing brisk business. DoorDash was keeping part of the Berkeley economy alive.

Imagine a less well-to-do community that also has shops, eateries, and professional services. What if there was a business concern or a nonprofit that decides they’re going to build a high-speed wireless to serve residents, shops, and the eateries. Step outside of your industry box and ponder that for a minute.

7. I’ve often suggested communities use broadband to structure a program in which low-income people are encouraged to follow their dreams and become entrepreneurs. The program would provide some basic business skills training and funding. In Chattanooga several organizations, in collaboration with the city, are ensuring that some with limited income have support and resources to explore and successfully engage with the city’s entrepreneurial ecosystem.

“I love the idea of entrepreneurship as a pathway out of poverty,” says Debra Socia, President/CEO of the Enterprise Center. “We need to ensure transparency about available networks, training, support, and funding. We’re working on such efforts here in Chattanooga.”
28% of those surveyed indicated they like the idea, but advise there be support programs that make the idea viable. Socia says, “How do you network if you don't have a network? How do you find resources if you don't know where to start?” She feels budding entrepreneurs need more. “We need to actively reach out to underrepresented communities in the ecosystem, provide them an entry point, scaffolding, and mentoring.”

8. The promised economic impact of telehealth will not be fully achieved until communities address digital literacy among both doctors and patients. In my first telehealth visit my iPhone showed a “mic” icon, which is how the doc and I know we have an audio connection. But the connection didn't work, neither of us had time, so we talked on the phone, defeating the purpose of the app.

“What happens if there isn't technical support when someone has a problem with an app?” asks Peter Caplan, the managing consultant for New York-based eHealth Systems & Solutions. “Who’s training patients what to do if the Net has a glitch? During COVID, many doctors didn’t fully understand how to properly do a virtual medical consult.”

CONCLUSION

This report is a snapshot of what is happening as economic developers accelerate the drive to derive significant economic value from broadband technology. Due to the pandemic, this last year has been anything but normal. On one hand, unemployment and small business closings went through the roof. On the other, so many rules and regulations went away that had stifled adoption of various technologies.

Look at the stats from the survey and particularly the comments at the end of it, we get a sense that there is an intense resolve by economic developers to get broadband deployed everywhere it needs to be. After this last year, it’s safe to assume that many see broadband and digital applications such telehealth and distance learning as community assets and economic engines.

Economic developers need to be at every broadband discussion table. I see significant buildups of municipal and public utility, wireless ISPs and co-ops broadband networks becoming a driving force behind high-speed internet adoption and usage as an increasing number of communities say, "We got this!” But how are you going to maximize broadband as an economic engine if you don’t have the experts from the economic development trenches be a part of these discussions?

Consider these national surveys with IEDC as one funnel for getting valuable data so broadband project teams and local stakeholders can make informed decisions. Much additional work has to be done locally to test these and other assumptions of the media, elected officials, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Then implement broadband strategies and tactics.
Survey author

Saved from a stroke by telehealth, Craig Settles pays it forward by uniting community broadband teams and healthcare stakeholders through telehealth initiatives. Mr. Settles built his reputation by helping community broadband improve economic development, healthcare, education, and local government. He hosts the Gigabit Nation talk show. Follow him on Twitter - @cjsettles101.

Mr. Settles’ consulting services, on-site works, reports, and books help community leaders and stakeholders leverage broadband as an economic driver. He's a nationally known and respected thought leader. Mr. Settles gets communities to ask the right questions so they find the best answers for their digital needs. E-mail today for more information: craig @ cjspeaks.com.

Survey sponsor ETI Software Solutions

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Survey partners IEDC and SizeUp

The International Economic Development Council (IEDC) is a non-profit professional membership association dedicated to helping economic developers do their job more effectively and raising the profile of the profession. When IEDC succeeds, their members create more high-quality jobs, develop more vibrant communities, and generally improve the quality of life in their regions. For more information, visit http://www.iedconline.org

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