Chapter XLV
Collaboration through Municipal Motivators

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reveals the common theme three rural Minnesota communities used in their collaboration efforts in to install and deliver broadband Internet as a municipal utility. The author discovered that the reason for this broadband initiative was a municipal motivator, unique to each city and not related to economic development. It is hoped that other rural communities in search of high-speed Internet, after having digested the results of this study, might conduct their own research in order to determine their true, underlying motivation for delivering improved Internet service. By agreeing on the motivator for each community, local leaders are better able to collaborate on achieving this common goal.

INTRODUCTION

A qualitative study conducted in July, 2006 using grounded theory determined that three rural Minnesota communities all had a common theme running through their collaboration efforts in securing broadband Internet for their respective cities (Smith, 2006). While the vast quantity of literature regarding development of broadband Internet into rural communities focuses on the purported improvement of the local economy, this study found communities were motivated by other factors. Each community had a concern which served to unify local leaders and produce a collaborative effort in achieving what individual committees or private firms could not accomplish, namely installing high-speed Internet service to residences and businesses.

The study applied grounded theory as the means for establishing which characteristics were dominant in assisting the municipalities in delivery of broadband Internet. The participants inter-

viewed in each community were represented by the following roles: city administrators, economic development directors, public utilities directors, operations managers of municipal telecommunications system, directors of marketing, members of telecommunications commissions, community development directors, and city council members. Data were analyzed qualitatively with three levels of coding applied: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

The findings indicate the major factor that drove the broadband Internet initiative was that each city had a purpose beyond simply wanting to install high-speed Internet service as an end in itself. This purpose was identified in the study as a municipal motivator, unique in its nature within each community, but vital to project success. Collaborative efforts, focused on the common municipal motivator, by local leadership played a major role in driving the broadband Internet initiative to completion (Smith, 2006).

RESEARCH METHOD

With a lack of studies providing a theory on the dynamics contributing to rural municipalities' development of broadband Internet, the constant comparative method of grounded theory was selected as a means for establishing which characteristics were dominant in assisting the subject municipalities to deliver broadband Internet. The constant comparative method produces "many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems" which when studied and analyzed provide an integrated theory arising from an "evolutionary body of knowledge" (Calloway, 1995, p. 1). Since no known theories exist regarding the characteristics of municipalities which have developed broadband Internet service, inductive research was used in an attempt to establish a new theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The interview method was chosen as the source-type because it allowed each person who had a key role in the project to express their own, unedited recollection of events (Hage, 1972). Through numerous interviews many voices were heard, analyzed, and categorized enabling a theory regarding the phenomenon of rural broadband Internet adoption to be constructed.

Cities selected for this study are located in rural Minnesota. Their broadband Internet experience was summarized in case studies generated by the Blandin Foundation of Minnesota (Blandin Foundation, 2004). Cities were selected based on four criteria. First, each community is located in rural Minnesota. Second, all of the cities have a long history of providing municipal utilities beyond the basic water and sewer services. Third, each community chose to develop their own high-speed Internet service without engaging any partners. Fourth, each municipality has a different method of providing broadband Internet. Windom provides Fiber To The Home (FTTH), Barnesville delivers Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) through their municipal telephone system, and Detroit Lakes offers wireless Internet.

Windom, Minnesota

Located in southern Minnesota with a population of 4,500 and a business community represented by manufacturing, agriculture, and medical enterprises, the city of Windom took a very aggressive broadband service approach in the fall of 2003. After completing telephone surveys, focus groups, and personal interviews, the city designed a plan to deliver a fiber to the premises (FTTP) network for businesses and residents (Optical Solutions, 2003). The city's first referendum, which went before the voters in the fall of 2000, attempted to secure funding for developing a feasibility study. This $8 million referendum failed, due largely to the Incumbent Local Exchange Carrier's (ILEC) promise to provide DSL service. Following the ILEC's subsequent decision to not install DSL, a second referendum met with success in 2002. (Sheehan, personal communication, January 27, 2005).

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