

ACCELERATE:

A COMMUNITY BROADBAND PLANNING PROGRAM

by Bill Coleman, Community Technology Advisors

A collaboration with Blandin Foundation
and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society

June 2022

ACCELERATE: A COMMUNITY BROADBAND PLANNING PROGRAM

by Bill Coleman

Published by the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society
June 2022



Broadband Delivers Opportunities
and Strengthens Communities

1041 Ridge Road, Unit 214
Wilmette, IL 60091
benton.org



100 North Pokegama Avenue
Grand Rapids, MN 55744
blandinfoundation.org



Guidebook made possible with funding from
Heartland Forward's
Connecting the Heartland initiative
heartlandforward.org

This work is licensed under the **Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 United States License**. A copy of this license is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/us/>

Please include the following attribution when citing this report:
Coleman, Bill. "Accelerate: A Community Broadband Planning Program." Wilmette, IL: Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, June 2022. benton.org/publications/Accelerate

CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	5
Foreword	6
Introduction	7
*Broadband Development Process Chart	8
Recruiting Communities	9
Recruiting Local Leaders	10
The Process	11
Use of Zoom	11
Support Materials and Resources	11
*Accelerate Program Calendar	12
Week One: Orientation Session	13
Sidebar: Team Member Commitment	13
Week Two: Broadband Mapping and Speed Test	14
Sidebar: Broadband Speed Tests	14
*Accelerate Broadband Mapping Worksheet	15
Week Three: Community Broadband Surveys	16
Sidebar: What's your broadband story?	16
*Accelerate Broadband Surveys Discussion Worksheet	18
Week Four: Creating a Community Broadband Vision/Interviewing Broadband Providers	19
Sidebar: What's in your vision?	19
*Accelerate Community Broadband Vision Worksheet	21
*Accelerate Guide to Interviewing Broadband Providers	22
Week Five: Communicating the Broadband Vision	24
Sidebar: Building a Countywide Coalition	24

* <i>Accelerate</i> : Communicating to Achieve Your Community Broadband Vision Worksheet	26
* <i>Accelerate</i> Initial Press Release Sample	29
* <i>Accelerate</i> Community Broadband Meeting Agenda (90 minutes) Sample	30
* <i>Accelerate</i> Local Organizations Support Resolution Sample	31
Week Six: Ownership and Partnership Models	32
Sidebar: Providers	32
* <i>Accelerate</i> Ownership and Partnership Models Worksheet	34
Week Seven: Community Progress Reports and Community Discussion	35
Week Eight: Community Progress Reports and Community Discussion	36
Week Nine: Feasibility Studies	37
* <i>Accelerate</i> Broadband Feasibility Worksheet	38
Week Ten: Federal and State Programs	39
* <i>Accelerate</i> Federal and State Program Opportunities Worksheet	40
Week Eleven: Local Broadband Finance Options	41
* <i>Accelerate</i> Local Broadband Finance Worksheet	42
Weeks Twelve and Thirteen: Local Planning Exercise	43
Sidebar: Planning and Collaboration Captures Opportunity	43
* <i>Accelerate</i> Planning Outline and Worksheet	44
Week Fourteen: Cohort Community Presentations	46
Sidebar: Infrastructure May Not be Enough	46
* <i>Accelerate</i> Presentation Outline (sample template included in the Google folder)	47
<i>Accelerate</i> Program Evaluations	48
*Mid-Process <i>Accelerate</i> Feedback Survey (to Community Team Leaders)	49
*Final <i>Accelerate</i> Evaluation Survey (to All Team Members)	49
<i>Accelerate</i> Community Planning Resources	50
Author's Biography	52

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society wishes to recognize **Blandin Foundation** for its innovative thinking in designing the *Accelerate* program in Minnesota and creating many of the tools shared in this guidebook. The Benton Institute is grateful to Bernadine Joselyn and her team for their generosity in sharing resources they developed so that other states can implement the *Accelerate* program to bring better broadband to their communities.

FOREWORD

*If you want to go fast, go alone;
if you want to go far, go together.*

—African proverb

The *Accelerate* community broadband planning program, outlined in this guidebook, offers states and communities an opportunity to go both fast and together—on their own timeline, within their own community, and in an organized cohort of communities learning together and working independently.

For fifteen years, Blandin Foundation—located in Grand Rapids, Minnesota—has been empowering rural community leaders to focus on improving broadband infrastructure and services to enable community vitality and quality of life. We trained these leaders on community broadband planning strategies to create their own path toward better connectivity. Our programs have threaded a balance of focus on spurring better infrastructure, addressing digital inclusion, and supporting more effective use of technology in business, education, health care, and social interaction.

By the spring of 2022, Blandin had partnered with more than seventy rural Minnesota communities to invest over \$5 million and leverage over \$12 million in matching dollars to fund hundreds of projects across the state for broadband planning and use. In addition, communities participating in Blandin programs have received millions in infrastructure development funds from federal and state agencies due to their community planning, commitment, and provider partnerships.

The pandemic made starkly visible a creeping truth about broadband: Access denied is opportunity denied. Even prior to the pandemic, Blandin saw a need to renew an emphasis on infrastructure development and created a community leader bootcamp. The pandemic forced a transformation to online webinars that was molded into the *Accelerate* process. *Accelerate* offers a proven method for creating and centering a shared community vision to shape broadband investments and plan with the future in mind.

Community planning and leadership will be essential to ensuring that new broadband investments by federal and state agencies meet community aspirations for advanced broadband networks. In this swirling tide of challenge and opportunity, those communities ready to seize the moment with a vision and a plan will be rewarded. Those who are not will see change, but not necessarily of their choosing.

Written in partnership with the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society one year after Blandin offered the first COVID-adapted *Accelerate* program, this handbook is a just-in-time tool to help states, regions, counties, and communities claim a broadband-enabled future. The tool works in the hands of a committed team, but it is the team—you and your neighbors, dear Reader—that is the indispensable ingredient for success. Getting the broadband you need will not be quick or easy. But with your determination, with commitment to your broadband vision and to one another, it can be done. Remember the wisdom of Benjamin Franklin: “Energy and persistence conquer all things.”

Good luck,

Bernadine Joselyn

Director, Public Policy & Engagement

Blandin Foundation

Grand Rapids, MN

INTRODUCTION

The *Accelerate* community broadband planning program educates and supports community leadership teams as they create their community's broadband vision and goals and pursue the best possible broadband solutions for their area.

By delivering the *Accelerate* process to multiple communities or counties simultaneously through a cohort approach, state broadband officials, university extension services, and others engaged in regional and community planning can provide high-quality education and guidance that empowers communities to effectively spur broadband deployment through a variety of deployment models, including public-private partnerships.

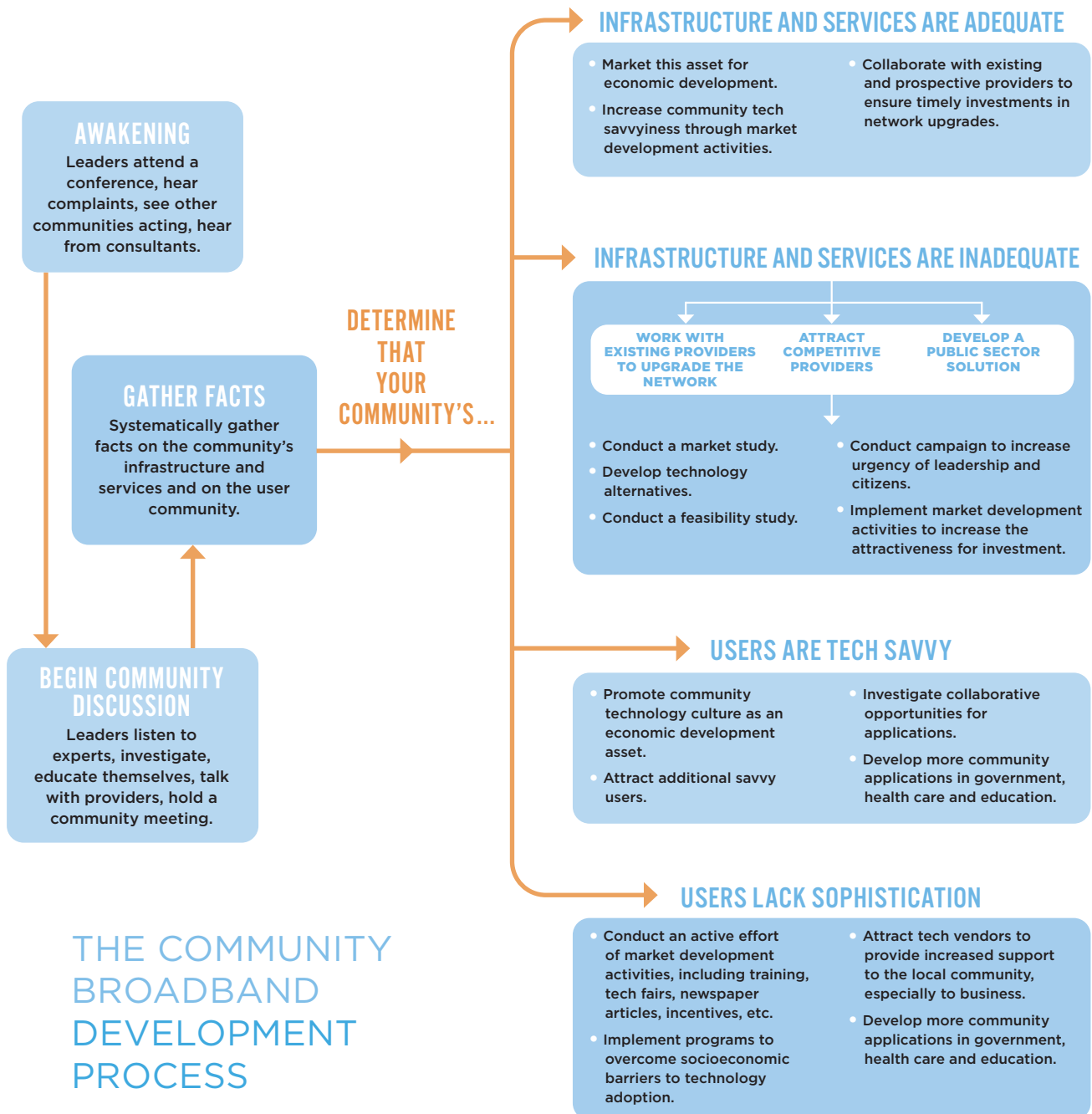
Accelerate is designed to increase leaders' ability to stimulate broadband infrastructure investments that support community goals such as economic development, telehealth delivery, distance learning, and civic engagement. Active engagement of community leadership is essential so that broadband infrastructure investments meet long-term community needs.

Community broadband planning is complicated. Informed planning requires teams with some or all of the following skills:

- Understanding current and emerging technologies
- Navigating the politics of public- and private-sector roles
- Analyzing financial models, including public-sector programs
- Structuring public-private partnership agreements

By empowering local leaders with knowledge, information, and a plan, communities will be well positioned to make progress on this significant challenge.

The graphic below illustrates the complexity of the community broadband development process. The timing of this process is highly variable, with some communities finding broadband partners and finance programs in rapid succession. The Roman philosopher Seneca said that good luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. Preparation requires bold community leadership that moves a community to gather data and build trusted relationships allowing them to be ready to act when opportunity arises.



Emerging state and federal broadband funding programs are challenging communities to be prepared to propose and implement projects. Program rules are complex, and application timelines can be short.

The *Accelerate* program will provide a solid basis for productive and well-considered broadband planning in the face of funding deadlines from federal and state agencies.

The fourteen-week *Accelerate* program provides leaders a path forward to better broadband services in their communities through:

- Facilitated weekly meetings
- Leadership education via archived webinars, expert presentations, and peer group discussions
- Information gathering, including community surveys, broadband provider interviews, broadband map review, and community meetings
- Step-by-step broadband planning to:
 - develop a broadband vision
 - understand the local marketplace
 - determine appropriate technologies
 - consider alternative broadband provider partnership models and prospective broadband provider partners
 - identify and seek available funding resources

The community coach provides the framework, the education, and the tools for this intensive program, which combines existing online content (webinar and conference recordings), cohort group learning opportunities, and end-of-program community broadband infrastructure planning consultation. In essence, this is a directed self-help program whereby community teams, with ongoing guidance, move rapidly from team formation to information gathering and policy making to project implementation.

Communities must be prepared for this rapid pace to keep up with the other communities in the cohort and to be ready to present their plans at the end of the program. Community broadband planning is a dynamic process, and communities can revisit and reform strategies on an ongoing basis.

Recruiting Communities

The program organizers should design a process to recruit participating communities. A “community” could be a single community, a city and its surrounding hinterlands, or a county. A state could have an open application process or could target counties that have the greatest need for assistance or have demonstrated the best readiness.

The program organizer should pick four to six communities to participate in a cohort. The cohort experience adds value as communities learn from one another throughout the process and bring helpful implementation tips with the key tasks, such as surveys, provider interviews, and local politics. If the cohort is too small, the program organizer would be missing out on a key program

efficiency of simultaneously assisting multiple communities. Conversely, too large a cohort may be logistically challenging to staff and manage.

A larger cohort could be considered with enough program organizer staff resources to support the communities. One powerful benefit of the *Accelerate* process is the interaction and shared learning between communities. Some of this might be lost with too many communities in the mix.

An effort involving two or more counties could be considered, recognizing that an effort across multiple counties may require significant coordination that might not fit the *Accelerate* program's speedy time frame. As the geographic scale increases, the number of stakeholders multiplies hindering community-level engagement, visioning, and decision-making. Consider the knowledge and consensus-building benefits of an eight to 15-member local team compared to a multi-county regional team of the same size. The regional team is likely to have far less legitimacy and influence with city and county decision-makers.

Adjacent counties that have completed their own *Accelerate* process may find many opportunities for collaboration. They may find that they share similar visions, prospective provider partners, and broadband development opportunities.

Recruiting Local Leaders

The makeup and commitment of the local team is critical. The steering team should have a minimum of eight members who have signed pledges to actively participate throughout the program and commit to attend all or most of the weekly meetings. A sample commitment letter can be found in the Benton Institute *Accelerate* [Google Drive Folder](#).

Steering teams can range from eight to fifteen members. It is critical to have a balance of community representatives: policy makers, anchor institution leaders, technologists, and end users who suffer from the lack of broadband. Passion for the cause can be a more important asset than technical knowledge.

A dedicated staff person who will lead on tasks, coordinate calendars, and manage the local process is essential. An extraordinary volunteer might be up to this significant task.

A team might include:

- Economic development director
- County board member
- Mayor or township board member
- County IT director
- School technology coordinator
- Two or three tech-hungry/savvy work- and/or school-from-home residents
- Technology-focused business owner or manager (computer sales/service, web design, etc.)
- A tech-oriented farmer or agriculture-equipment dealer or agriculture co-op manager

A community may choose to include a local Internet Service Provider (ISP) on their team if there is consensus that they are a good choice for a public-private partnership or they are already serving nearby communities. Communities should make sure that incumbent providers will be receptive to a community's vision and not just interested in maintaining the status quo.

The Process

The *Accelerate* process includes weekly, topical, two-hour meetings with the cohort of four to six communities convening together as a large group. Prior to the weekly meeting, team members watch an archived video webinar at their convenience. The first hour of the meeting generally includes news and updates from the communities, topic experts who add timely information that builds on the webinar, and advice for completing the upcoming tasks.

The second hour serves as an opportunity for individual community teams to meet to provide updates, come to consensus on vision and policy decisions, and plan next steps. The *Accelerate* program staff spend time with each team to check progress, offer guidance, mediate policy discussions, and provide best-practice examples.

Midway through the program, there is a respite from new weekly topics so that communities can complete the information-gathering phase that includes a community survey, broadband map analysis, and internet service provider interviews.

In the final weeks of the program, the lead program consultant meets individually with each community one or two times to finalize the community plans, using a PowerPoint template as a guide. Each community then presents its plan to the other cohort member teams and receives feedback. The culmination of the program is a requirement to present the plan to local policy makers and community members as a strategy to build awareness and support.

Use of Zoom

The *Accelerate* program is designed to be delivered over videoconference—Zoom or some other tool. This eliminates the need for travel and allows program staff to work with multiple communities simultaneously, which provides for great efficiencies and cross-community interaction and learning. A hybrid approach is possible, with community teams meeting on-site together, but effective meeting facilitation from a distance requires high-quality videoconference equipment within the communities. Oftentimes, those online have a hard time participating and hearing in these hybrid meetings, which detracts from the experience and results. Zoom meetings also help lower the barrier to weekly participation, as the time commitment is less. Even within a single county, travel times can be challenging for some outlying residents. For some residents, connectivity is a significant and obvious challenge for which participation by phone or joining at another's home or a public-access site are the best options.

Support Materials and Resources

Presenter PowerPoints, worksheets, sample surveys, and other support materials are stored and downloadable from a Benton Institute [Google Drive Folder](#).

Accelerate Program Calendar

PROGRAM TIMELINE	WEEKLY TOPICS
WEEK 1	Orientation meeting
WEEK 2	Broadband mapping and speed tests
WEEK 3	Community broadband surveys
WEEK 4	Setting the community vision Community meetings with broadband providers
WEEK 5	Communicating the broadband vision
WEEK 6	Ownership and partnership models
WEEK 7	Community progress reports: “What is going right? Where do you need help?”
WEEK 8	Community progress reports: “What is going right? Where do you need help?”
WEEK 9	Conducting feasibility studies
WEEK 10	Federal and state broadband programs
WEEK 11	Local broadband financing tools
WEEK 12	“What does it all mean?” individual community meeting
WEEK 13	“What do we plan to do?” individual community meeting
WEEK 14	Community presentations!
FOLLOWING WEEKS	Community presentations in Home Community Project development and implementation

For each weekly meeting, program organizers generally provide a meeting agenda, a PowerPoint presentation for the meeting leader, an assigned webinar (generally archived, sometimes live), and a community worksheet to be completed in the second hour. Weekly expert speakers also provide supporting PowerPoint slide decks.

Team Member Commitment

Recruiting a great team is essential for success. Finding the right mix of folks who are willing to spend three hours per week for fourteen weeks on a community broadband initiative is quite the ask of time and energy in this busy world.

While some people might want to downplay the commitment and hope that team members stay committed through the process, Whiteside County in Illinois did just the opposite. As they recruited team members, they asked them to sign commitment letters that detailed the participation task list. Although that might have scared off some prospective members, it created a bond between those who signed on and reassured everyone that the entire team would do their best to be fully committed to the effort.

This commitment to the process has transformed some team members into true community broadband champions who are willing to go far beyond the initial commitment.

The *Accelerate* process supports positive team dynamics by providing a planning framework that ensures progress through the community broadband process. The sense of momentum reassures team members that their time is well spent and productive. By providing high-quality leadership education and examples of best practices, teams gain a sense of confidence that solutions are possible, and even probable. In a recent Blandin evaluation survey, 21 of 22 respondents said that they would recommend the *Accelerate* program to other communities.

WEEK ONE: Orientation Session

The Orientation provides a foundation for community success. Individual team members and the team as a whole must feel confident in the process, the role of team members, the scope of the work, and the desired outcomes from the process. For a variety of reasons such as the short time frames for program recruitment and the application process, it is likely that some team members committed to participate without a full understanding of the *Accelerate* program so this orientation is critical to get everyone on the same page.

The goals for the Orientation are:

- Community team members meet and learn about each other
- Organizers provide clear and concise information about the program
- Experts provide a “Broadband 101” session on technology options and community roles
- Teams discuss local program implementation and logistics

Pre-Session Homework

Watch archived webinar

“How I Think About the Importance of Communities in the 21st Century” —Thomas Friedman

https://youtu.be/ySi_N15gvfA

Meeting Agenda

Welcome and introduction by *Accelerate* sponsors

Community introductions: “Tell us about your community.”

Program Overview - *Accelerate* team

Breakout Rooms - Member introductions: “Tell us your broadband story.”

Broadband 101 - *Accelerate* team presentation

Breakout Rooms - Local logistics and discussion

Adjourn

WEEK TWO: Broadband Mapping and Speed Tests

Broadband maps are an essential tool for community broadband planning. Geographic Information System (GIS) technology allows map makers to combine many layers of information, including broadband services and number of providers, demographic data, population densities, topography and tree cover, and local broadband survey and speed test data. Broadband grant program criteria can be an additional layer of analysis.

Many state governments use Federal Communications Commission data and other provider data to create an interactive broadband mapping system. Please note that due to the way broadband service data is submitted by providers to the FCC, the maps often overstate broadband availability. A new FCC mapping protocol is in early implementation and should provide improvements to map accuracy and reliability.

The goals for this meeting are:

- Demonstrate the state broadband mapping tool
- Demonstrate other mapping tools, including the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) mapping system and/or engaged mapping vendors
- Promote the value of broadband mapping tools to broadband finance programs
- Initiate community discussion on how well broadband data matches perceived area broadband services

Pre-Session Homework

Broadband Mapping

https://youtu.be/8jMOzf9FX_g

Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

Introduction to broadband mapping and speed tests – uses and limitations

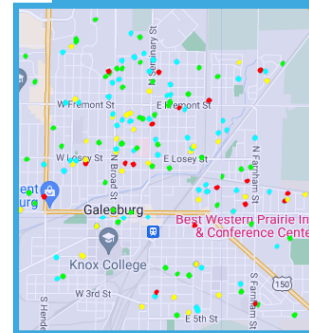
State broadband mapping system demonstration

Other map systems and tools – NTIA/private vendors

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Presentation of map packets

Community map discussion



There is great frustration with existing federal and state broadband maps. According to FCC mapping rules, providers have been able to claim that an entire census

block is served if one address within that block can get 25 Mbps/3 Mbps service. Providers might also claim “up to 25 Mbps/3 Mbps” when the ability to deliver that speed might not be present consistently—or ever. Broadband speed tests can provide another source of data to supplement or challenge the maps.

Many communities include a broadband speed test as an element of a community survey. These online test sites allow users to record the download and upload speeds that they are experiencing on their home devices. The tests might also check other quality indicators like latency and jitter. Data from speed tests can be used to verify the availability and quality of broadband services across a selected geographic area. Used in combination with Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping capabilities, communities can create maps that illustrate broadband shortcomings (or great service!).

Some broadband providers argue against the use of speed tests. They cite how factors outside the control of providers, like poor household wiring and equipment, can slow speeds down. Other influencing factors include the use of Wi-Fi connections rather than wired, the number of devices on a network, and multiple users on the same connection. These factors do influence the speed-test results of any given user.

Speed-test advocates counter that large numbers of speed tests can provide a reliable representation of an area’s broadband services. If most users are clocking broadband speeds at less than 10 Mbps when maps indicate an area has 25 Mbps/3 Mbps, that would indicate network issues rather than individual user issues. Broadband advocates can ensure large numbers of tests through community promotion, inclusion on broadband surveys, and the actions of neighborhood broadband champions.

Accelerate Broadband Mapping Worksheet

1. What is your reaction to the broadband maps for your area? How much of your community is served with adequate broadband? Which areas are unserved? Do you find the maps of your area to be accurate? Any surprises?
2. What do the maps say about broadband competition in your region?
3. Based on the maps, which areas of your community offer the best opportunities for new broadband deployment? Which areas are adjacent to quality providers? Which unserved areas have the highest population densities? Which areas are most suitable for a fixed wireless solution?
4. Which parts of your community will be the most difficult to serve? Why?
5. What questions do you want to ask your providers based on the maps?

WEEK THREE: Community Broadband Surveys

It is essential to understand the market for additional or improved broadband services. Each community will have a unique blend of existing broadband services and community demographics that shape the marketplace. For businesses and residents, the quality and price of broadband services might be a significant issue and cause difficulties in daily living; other communities may have higher levels of satisfaction. In some markets, residents with lower education and income levels may not have strong interest in subscribing to new broadband offerings, thus making the community less attractive for broadband network investment.

Community broadband surveys gather information on the following topics:

- Satisfaction with existing services (price, quality, and reliability)
- Reasons residents are not subscribing to existing broadband services
- Verification of price of service and service offerings
- How current broadband services affect residents' daily lives

A well-executed community broadband survey can provide high-quality information for decision-making: for the team, including for local elected officials; and for current and prospective broadband providers. Local elected officials will want to understand how the lack of broadband impacts their constituents and how willing residents are to support local government investment. Broadband providers will want to understand the nature of and customer satisfaction with the existing broadband services and the willingness to switch providers and subscribe at a given price point.

A broadband survey often includes a broadband speed test that documents the quality of existing broadband services as received by customers.

The goals for this meeting are:

- Educate teams about the different strategies for conducting community broadband surveys, including speed tests
- Devise strategies for survey implementation
- Develop a list of community partners for survey promotion

Pre-Session Homework

Community Broadband Surveys

https://youtu.be/gKfrzm4_7G4

“What’s your broadband story?”

Unsurprisingly, almost every community broadband survey validates the hypothesis that respondents want faster, more reliable, and less expensive broadband internet services. As consumers, we always want it all. So, if we know the answers already, why even do a survey? Why not skip right to problem-solving?

Marketers tell us that data is necessary and interesting; but it is the stories that win people over to a cause or a product. A great broadband survey question is: “What is your broadband story?” This question allows respondents to share their experience—positive or negative—about how their broadband service, or their quest for broadband service, impacts their lives.

On the positive side, folks can share how newly installed fiber optics have allowed them to work from home, attend K-12 schools and take post-secondary and continuing education classes remotely, virtually visit the doctor, and communicate with friends and family. These can be powerful testimonials to the power of a great internet connection. Here is an example from an East Central Minnesota broadband survey:

“Everything changed when fiber came to our area. Now I can do meetings over Zoom with family. It’s also great when family comes to visit: They can stay connected and even work from here.”

Even more powerful and valuable are the stories from people who struggle daily with the lack of broadband and other digital equity issues that cost these families money, time, convenience, health, and general peace of mind. Here are additional examples:

From EAST CENTRAL MINNESOTA

“We are both college students. My husband works full time and needs computer access. We have children who need computer access. Our internet service constantly cuts out and sometimes interferes with tests and connecting to our school’s website. This is by far the worst connection we’ve ever had.”

“Our provider is terrible. It took months to even get hooked up and then they had cable run 1/4 mile along the side of the road for two months until it got snagged on a tractor. Took them



Important Note: It is critical that communities move quickly to launch and complete the survey. A delayed implementation will mean that survey data will not be available for use for the community strategy development stage of the program. A recommended timeline follows:

Accelerate Community Broadband Survey Timeline

Week 2	Importance of broadband speed tests
Week 3	Community broadband survey overview
Weeks 3-4	Survey customization and marketing strategy development
Week 5	Survey promotion and launch
Week 8	Preliminary data review; adjust marketing/distribution strategy
Week 10	Close survey; manage data
Week 11	Produce survey reports
Weeks 12-13	Analysis and planning
Week 14	Community presentations

Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

Round robin discussion of past/current broadband survey efforts

Available survey deployment and analysis support via *Accelerate*

Expert resource presentation/process description

Next steps

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Small group discussion of the best ways to complete a community broadband survey

Completion of the discussion worksheet

LARGE GROUP

Community discussion summary

Q & A

Next steps review

Adjourn

another month to come fix it. They claim it should be 'up to' 27 Mbps; it never is."

"I am a doctor and have thought about moving out of the area due to lack of reliable internet—it makes it nearly impossible to work at home."

From ILLINOIS

"Having an option for business internet service that works ... is important ... without the frequent outages and high costs."

"I just built a home. I did not know that reliable internet was an issue or I would have [built] elsewhere."

"I had to quit a job due to poor internet."

"They [broadband providers] have put an economic choke hold in the area by offering subpar services."

Broadband planning teams can use these powerful stories on social media, in newspaper stories, and in community presentations to highlight the daily disadvantages that community members face. This active engagement can drive strong and widespread community support for broadband infrastructure projects.

Accelerate Broadband Surveys Discussion Worksheet

1. Who are the audiences for our community broadband survey results (local policy makers, community residents, broadband providers, etc.)? In other words, whom are we trying to convince to take action based on this information?
2. What strategies (prizes, competitions, publicity), platforms (press releases, social media, texting lists, web pages), and partners (schools, chambers of commerce, government agencies) can we use to spur people to take the survey?
3. For us, which objective is more important: conducting a randomized, statistically valid survey or getting the largest possible numbers of people wanting improved broadband to complete the survey?
4. Who can help us to distribute, promote, and collect surveys? What combination of strategies can we use (online, paper, mail out/mail in, etc.)?
5. Should we partner with a particular prospective broadband provider on this survey initiative?
6. Who can help us analyze the data (county GIS, graphic designers, university extension, statisticians)?
7. With whom will we be willing to share the data, especially survey respondents' contact information?
8. How are we planning to use and share the results?

WEEK FOUR: Creating a Community Broadband Vision/Interviewing Broadband Providers

Establishing a shared vision for better broadband is a more difficult task than one would assume. You need to consider geography, partnership and ownership models, technology choices, equity, and more. Expect to revisit your vision statement throughout this process as you learn and plan. That vision will be an important tool to inform your community about the goals of your initiative. Creating and pursuing a vision often requires brave leadership.

Identifying prospective broadband partners is an essential task for communities pursuing improved broadband. Partnerships can take many forms. The most common partnerships are grants to incumbent or competitive private-sector providers that subsidize equipment and construction costs. Some communities contract directly with partners that design, deploy, and operate a publicly-owned broadband network. Finally, some communities enter into public infrastructure/private service models. The public entity finances, builds, and maintains the basic infrastructure and the private entity provides the service over that infrastructure and runs the broadband business

Communities will want to consider both existing providers and prospective provider partners that offer services in a nearby community or are known to be open to and seeking community partnerships. If you need assistance obtaining provider contact information, contact the program lead agency, state broadband office, and/or state broadband associations. (There are usually separate associations for telephone companies, electric cooperatives, cable companies, and wireless companies.)

The goals for this meeting are:

- Learn the importance of a broadband vision
- Begin the vision discussion in your community meeting
- Create a plan for broadband provider interviews
- Finalize survey instrument and deployment plans

Pre-Session Homework

Setting the Vision

<https://youtu.be/1c1EBaLcfog>

What's in your vision?

Creating and adopting a community broadband vision is an important component of the *Accelerate* process. Each word in a vision statement adds meaning that will help to guide future policy and project development and will help policy makers decide if a proposed project is acceptable for public investment. It is a valuable exercise to spend the time discussing the key outcomes that a community is seeking and the trade-offs of cost, capacity, speed and breadth of deployment, affordability, reliability, network ownership, and other factors. A shared consensus among decision makers makes for easier choices when real opportunities are considered.

Connection Equity + Economic Viability = Pine County's Goal

We want everyone in Pine County to have access to high-speed internet so that the entire county will be able to conduct business and provide opportunities into the future.



Some communities adopt visions that are very specific, while others take a more general approach, as illustrated by the vision statements adopted in our first Blandin Minnesota and Benton Illinois cohorts. A more specific vision may limit technology choices or may require more aggressive public-sector involvement. Affordability language may limit provider interest or, again, require a more active public-sector role, as would statements that put a focus on serving all area residents.

Vision

To create an environment where all tribal and community homes and businesses within the Mille Lacs Tribal Economy have access to reliable and affordable one gigabit symmetrical broadband by 2026.

Kanabec Team Vision & Mission

Vision
To provide efficient and affordable high speed Internet to our region



Mission
To provide high speed Internet to every home and business to foster community vitality, affordable and quality health care, equitable education, a strong economy and efficient government

Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

Community updates – successes and challenges

Presentation: Creating a powerful vision

Broadband Vision Statement examples

Advice for conducting broadband provider interviews

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Use the Vision worksheet to organize the initial discussion

Share list of area broadband providers

Share guide to interviewing broadband providers

***Accelerate Community Broadband Vision* Worksheet**

1. Does our community have an existing broadband vision?
2. What did we learn from listening to other communities about how they set and pursued their visions?
3. What key words and concepts do we want to include in our vision statement?
4. Who else in our community needs to be a part of the visioning process? How do we engage them?
5. What are we willing to do as a community to achieve our vision?
6. What are the largest barriers to achieving our vision?

Accelerate Guide to Interviewing Broadband Providers

Questions for broadband providers already offering service in your area

1. Please describe the broadband services that you can currently deliver to residents and businesses across our community. What percentage of customers can obtain broadband services that meet current state goals?
2. Here is the broadband map that illustrates current broadband coverage. What plans does your company have that would move our area toward the state broadband goal?

Question for all broadband providers

3. What impact will previously committed federal dollars—including the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), Connect America Fund Phase II (CAFII), the Alternative Connect America Cost Model (ACAM), and USDA ReConnect—have on your company's plans for broadband investment in our area?
4. What could we do to spur investment by your company in high-performance broadband infrastructure in our area?
5. As you consider the business case for infrastructure investment in our area, what can you tell us about the public investment needed to make that happen? What else could our community do to assist you, including permitting, rights of way, market development activities, and so forth?
6. If there were an effort to build publicly owned broadband infrastructure in our area, would your company consider leasing access on it as sole provider or, in an open access model, as one of several competitive providers?

7. What are your most popular internet service packages, and what are the prices for those packages?

8. What is your company's capital investment decision-making process, and what is the typical timeline for these decisions?

9. Over what time frame does your company measure required return on investment?

10. Besides the delivery of broadband services, what other benefits does your company bring to the communities that you serve?

11. Can you describe any economic development projects in which your company has been involved in a community similar to ours?

WEEK FIVE: Communicating the Broadband Vision

Successful community broadband initiatives combine strong technology and financial planning with community awareness and marketing. The steering teams should promote adoption of the community broadband vision throughout the community, including among key leadership institutions—local government, school boards, chambers of commerce and economic development organizations, service and senior citizen clubs, and beyond. Having a communications plan is essential to a high-quality and consistent messaging campaign.

The communications effort may include tactics such as events, press releases, social media engagement, community presentations and meetings, and technology demonstrations to achieve the wins needed to build toward a community’s vision. A sample press release is included in this handbook. Also included is a sample community meeting agenda. A community meeting can be a great opportunity to receive input as well as to provide information. Community meetings can also uncover prospective community broadband champions. Asking local organizations, like city councils or town boards, school boards, chambers of commerce and economic development organizations, social and service clubs, and others to endorse a broadband initiative can be a powerful communications tool. A sample resolution is included.

The goals for this meeting are:

- Determine the key audiences for messaging
- Determine the key messages
- Create the outline for a messaging strategy

Pre-Session Homework

Communicating to Achieve Your Community Broadband Vision

<https://youtu.be/xprcKSXq3d0>

Building a Countywide Coalition

Mercer County, Illinois, illustrates how attracting support from residents and organizations across a county can build momentum for better broadband.

Broadband infrastructure was just one of many priorities that emerged from Mercer County Better Together (MCBT) in 2016, a countywide community development process. But MCBT leadership soon recognized that broadband was the essential infrastructure to support everything else in the plan.

As a participant in the *Illinois Connected Communities* program in 2020–21, MCBT began the hard work necessary to build a countywide coalition to pursue broadband infrastructure improvements. MCBT worked to develop its own expertise in the broadband area, met and learned from existing broadband providers, evaluated various technology options, and gathered key stakeholders. MCBT promoted a broadband speed test that documented slow internet speeds and the need for improvements.

It was time for the next step – create a strategic plan. The Mercer County Board of Supervisors took the project to the next level by participating in the Illinois Broadband *Accelerate* Program. The *Accelerate* team, led by the Board, consisted of community volunteers from organizations that have key interest and experience in broadband infrastructure. Through the program, they have created a solid base to continue broadband development efforts. But the team recognized that some voices were missing: rural residents, farmers, and township officials.

To close this leadership gap, *Accelerate* team members, equipped with broadband handouts, postcards and surveys, and a quick script, visited fifteen annual township meetings. Through these visits, township residents and officials became more aware of the County Board’s efforts to bring broadband infrastructure to their communities. Township residents completed broadband surveys and signed up as volunteers. Township officials learned how much residents, especially farmers and families with school-age children, were impacted by poor broadband services. This outreach to townships helped convince county board members that rural constituents supported the broadband initiative. Now, the Broadband Executive Team—four broadband and



Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

Presentation: Creating a community broadband communications plan

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Tackle the Communications Plan worksheet

community development professionals that the board has recognized as leaders in broadband thanks to the *Accelerate* Program—has a strategic plan with clear steps forward to serve the most un- and underserved residents of Mercer County.

In addition to outreach to individuals, effective broadband coalitions should also focus on building support through local stakeholder groups like agriculture associations, chambers of commerce, school districts, health care providers, senior citizens, and youth groups—the list is endless. These organizations can bring credibility, energy, and communications resources that amplify community broadband messaging to elected officials, funding agency leadership and staff, and prospective broadband provider partners.

An energized coalition can greatly increase the chances for success!

Accelerate

Communicating to Achieve Your Community Broadband Vision Worksheet

VISION

What does it look like when you're successful?

TEAM

Who are your community champions who will propel the vision?

How will your vision help: Inform technology and network design choices? Inform the partners you pick? Inspire a constituency of champions? Sustain action and progress over time? Help you stay accountable?

What kind of skill sets will you need? What networks will you need to access? Who is personally passionate about the issue? Who will be the "doers"? Who can give you an unbiased opinion or play devil's advocate?

CLIMATE

What's working in your favor? What do you need to overcome?

What are your greatest assets? What challenges do you face? Who else is working on the issue? Who is working against you—and why? What current events and opportunities can you use to your advantage? What resources are available for your project?

MILESTONES

What smaller wins do you need to build toward your vision?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.+

INFLUENCE STRATEGY

Pick one milestone and answer the following questions:

Who are the decision makers who can help you reach this milestone?

What conditions and factors are your decision makers considering?

To whom do your decision makers listen? Or who has the most influence over your decision makers?

Which decision maker is the easiest for you to reach and/or could be a strong advocate for you?

MAJOR TACTICS

What actions will you take to achieve the milestones you're working on?

1.

2.

3.

4.

BUILDING YOUR STORY

The Need or Opportunity:
Why should they care?

What You Are Doing:
What is the conflict, and what are you doing to address it?

Vision: What is the outcome?
Why will it matter to the people you're talking to?

Potential Stories:
What are some of the stories in your community that could help you connect with your audience to help you achieve your vision?

Courtesy of [Spitfire Strategies](#)

Accelerate Initial Press Release Sample

[INSERT LOGO IF APPLICABLE]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[COMMUNITY NAME] Creates Team Work for Better Broadband Access

CITY, STATE. (DATE) - [Community Name] is participating in a 14-week, fast-track program to create a countywide plan for expanding broadband access. (STATE PARTNERS) will support community leaders as they gather information about current broadband access and options in [community], connect with other communities on best practices and successful models, and go through an opportunity analysis to identify the best path forward.

The steering committee leading this work for [Community Name] includes: [List names and relevant roles for all community participants]

[Add quote on why it's important for your community to work together on a plan for better broadband]

*Use broadband data to help build the case for why the community is involved in this work. [Community Name] currently ranks ## out of STATE counties with %% of the county served by broadband speeds of [XX] megabits per second download and [XX] megabits per second upload. These speeds are needed to do things like XYZ.

[Community Name] joins (OTHER PARTNERS) in the *Accelerate* program.

*Provide quotes or modify the quotes to suit the voice of the speaker and the specifics of the community. "Local leadership is necessary to drive local broadband access solutions," said (SPONSOR QUOTE). "We're proud to work with local community teams, like [Community Name], who realize it is up to them to develop a vision for what a broadband-fueled future looks like and go after that vision."

"We will soon be launching a survey to document the need for broadband investment. We need to show prospective broadband providers that they can be sure that residents are anxious for better services. The more people who respond to the survey, the better message we send."

"We welcome any community member who wants to join the broadband team."

What to wrap with? Opportunity for feasibility grant? Invitation for community to get involved in some way? Other?

###

Media Contact:

Accelerate Community Broadband Meeting Agenda (90 minutes) Sample

1. Welcome (by recognized community leader) - 5 minutes
2. Introductions of attendees - 20 minutes
 - a. Name, where they live, community role: "What is your broadband story?"
 - b. If under 20 people, stay in large group. More than 20, breakout groups of 6-8
 - c. If small groups, ask each table to share one of their stories
3. Report to the community - 15 minutes
 - a. Broadband 101
 - b. Work to date and findings
4. Options - 20 minutes
 - a. Broadband success story from another community or
 - b. Presentation by your preferred provider partner or
 - c. Panel presentation of current and prospective providers
5. Community discussion (large or small groups as above) - 20 minutes
 - a. What should we do next?
 - b. What roles should our local government consider?
 - c. What other things do we need to think about?
 - d. Small group share-out
6. Next steps, thank you, and adjourn - 10 minutes

***Accelerate* Local Organizations Support Resolution** Sample

_____ are working to bring better and more affordable high-speed broadband services to our community, as recent information ranks our region as in the most need for broadband across [STATE].

Data

Whereas high-speed broadband is necessary today and increasingly essential for community vitality, including competitive economic development, affordable and high-quality health care, equitable education, and effective government.

Now therefore, the [Org Name] supports the [community] *Accelerate* team's efforts to improve access to high-quality broadband for [community] businesses and residents.

WEEK SIX: Ownership and Partnership Models

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 shifted U.S. communications services from a regulated monopoly model to a reliance on a competitive marketplace. This paradigm shift failed to recognize that high infrastructure costs are a significant barrier to telecommunications competition, especially in rural areas where low population density inhibits return on investment.

As the value of high-speed connectivity increases, community leaders are motivated to create and pursue strategies to overcome the failure of the private marketplace to ensure that their community has the infrastructure and services necessary to attract people and investment. The lack of private-sector investment has resulted in services that are inadequate, unreliable, too expensive, or just not available.

There are many models for public-sector engagement to fix local broadband services. In rare cases, community leaders can achieve success by taking only a limited role as advocate or cheerleader. On the other end of the spectrum would be a community-owned and -operated broadband network. Between those scenarios lives a whole range of options that include grants to existing private broadband providers, attraction and support of new providers, government-owned open access networks with one or more private operators, and the creation of a new community-owned broadband cooperative. Each community is required to determine its preferred place on this engagement continuum, measuring its risk tolerance, market conditions, provider interest, and long-term goals to create its own unique solution.

The goals for this meeting are:

- Introduce the various ways that communities can support broadband development
- Highlight the benefits and risks of these roles
- Showcase community examples
- Begin the community discussion about what range of roles would be appropriate in their circumstance

Pre-Session Homework

Ownership Models and Provider Partnerships

<https://youtu.be/iWwJZ6vE0gg>

Providers

Attracting provider partners and spurring broadband infrastructure investment—these are the goals of *Accelerate*. Success requires a community to convince one or more providers that their investment will provide an adequate return. Providers must cover the cost of their capital, plus the costs for operations, maintenance, and sales and marketing. And building some level of cash reserves and some profit will make a project even more attractive!

Providers evaluate communities on a variety of factors and then use their own corporate requirements to determine whether a community is a good fit. Publicly traded companies generally require higher returns over shorter time frames than a cooperative or public entity. Small to midsize privately held companies might fall some place in between.

Communities can attract provider partners by lowering the costs of the investment, primarily through grants. While low-interest loans may be attractive to some, most providers need to find ways to reduce the capital cost to make their financial models work. Some companies have existing loan agreements that restrict their ability to borrow, so leasing a government-owned network is an attractive option.

Giving providers free or low-cost access to existing middle-mile or local fiber and/or conduit systems can be of benefit, as can providing a secure location for a co-location/network operating system. Easing access to easements and publicly owned utility poles are additional low-cost strategies.

Communities can also help lower provider startup costs by assisting new providers with market development assistance. Partnering on community surveys, community events, and other strategies can showcase the new provider and make their sales cycle shorter and more efficient.

The provider interview process is an opportunity to learn the key elements of how various broadband providers think and what is important to them. Based on the initial interviews, communities can determine which providers are most likely to be good partners and engage in ongoing discussions. Communities should understand their own legal requirements around partner selection, especially regarding financial tools and RFPs/RFIs.



Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

Ownership and Partnership presentation

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Complete the Ownership and Partnership worksheet

Follow-up on surveys, provider interviews, communications efforts, etc.

Some communities invite providers onto their *Accelerate* teams. In fact, Aitkin County, Minnesota, had three broadband providers on their *Accelerate* team, all competitive providers seeking opportunity for growth. Mark Jeffers, the county's economic development coordinator, said that this was not an easy situation to navigate but made for illuminating discussions and more informed decision-making. The Whiteside County, Illinois, team had two broadband providers on their team, plus an open-access middle-mile provider. Comcast staff added value on two Illinois community teams.

The *Accelerate* process can provide an opportunity to build a trusting relationship, increase understanding of both community and provider goals, and increase the technological capacity of the *Accelerate* team. To be a valuable member of the *Accelerate* team, the invited provider must see itself as part of a prospective solution and not engage in behavior that blocks a community from its goals. After all, a community would not be in the *Accelerate* program if its broadband services were adequate.

Accelerate Ownership and Partnership Models Worksheet

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the various partnership/ownership models in light of our community culture and politics and our present attractiveness for broadband development?

	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Pure private ownership with public financial support		
Electric or telephone cooperative ownership		
Public ownership/ public operation		
Public ownership/ private ISP(s) operation		

What characteristics are we seeking in a long-term partner? Desirable characteristics might include experience, goals and vision match, financial strength, capacity to grow, and fair recognition of community contributions.* Which ISPs meet these qualifications?

What can our community bring to the partnership table? What can we do to make our community an even more attractive partner? Do we need a new entity in our county/region (cooperative or joint powers board) to accomplish our vision?

As a partner, what are we willing to do? What won't we do?

What are our next steps to identify and make a deal with partners?

* Courtesy of Doug Dawson, [CCG Consulting](#)

WEEK SEVEN: **Community Progress Reports and Community Discussion**

The next two weeks provide community teams a chance to complete key work activities such as the vision statement, community broadband surveys, provider interviews, community communications, community broadband summits, and so forth.

This two-week period also offers the chance to highlight community or provider best practices and emerging policy issues, or to invite guest speakers such as state or local broadband champions, state broadband providers, broadband advocacy groups, consultants, and others.

The goals for this meeting are:

- Share progress reports and learnings among the communities
- Provide timely information from program team
- Provide content that motivates and informs the communities
- Provide time for communities to solidify their visions and plan their efforts

Pre-Session Homework:

To be determined. Identify and assign high-quality, timely, national or state broadband-focused webinar or video content such as shown on the resource page at the end of this document.

Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

Community Progress Reports: Successes and Challenges

Guest speakers

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Follow-up on surveys, provider interviews, communications efforts, etc.

WEEK EIGHT: **Community Progress Reports and Community Discussion**

Community teams complete key work activities such as the vision statement, community broadband surveys, provider interviews, community communications, community broadband summits, and so forth.

The goals for this meeting are:

- Share progress reports and learnings among the communities
- Provide timely information from program team
- Provide content that motivates and informs the communities
- Provide time for communities to solidify their visions and plan their efforts

Pre-Session Homework

To be determined. Identify high-quality, timely, national or state broadband-focused webinar or video content.

Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

Community Progress Reports: Successes and Challenges

Guest speakers

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Follow-up on vision development, surveys, provider interviews, communications efforts, etc.

WEEK NINE: Feasibility Studies

Community broadband initiatives like *Accelerate* are valuable for determining community vision, establishing reliable information around broadband services and community satisfaction, identifying prospective broadband partners, and clarifying community broadband roles. These plans can carry a community forward to a successful broadband project. But successful completion of the *Accelerate* program may not be enough to stimulate broadband investment.

A more formal and detailed broadband feasibility study may be required that will establish specific broadband deployment costs, implementation strategies, business pro formas, and financing requirements. Feasibility studies are performed by engineering and telecommunications business consultants. Depending on the scope and depth, a study for a community just beginning its broadband planning can range in cost from \$40,000 to over \$100,000. Cost factors include geographic scale, sophistication of consumer broadband survey, requirements for mapping of existing infrastructure and services, available completed broadband planning documentation, and requirements for community participation, including steering teams and community engagement.

A post-*Accelerate* feasibility study would incorporate and build on the work completed by the *Accelerate* team. The team would work with the selected consultant to identify and fill gaps in the community knowledge base, especially in terms of technology alternatives, estimated network deployment costs, and discussions with prospective broadband provider partners. These firms have significant expertise in provider negotiations and grant structuring and writing.

The community team should co-design the study so that it provides the high-quality information essential for decision-making. The best studies are done in partnership with the study sponsor—the *Accelerate* team in this case—so that the process serves as a decision-making funnel resulting in a clear implementation strategy.

The goals for this meeting are:

- Explain the various components of a broadband feasibility study
- Educate the community team about how to determine which study components will be the most valuable to the community
- Help a community determine if it needs a formal feasibility study and, if so, which study components to include in the study

Pre-Session Homework

Feasibility Studies

https://youtu.be/UfmihWEt_PM

Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

Broadband feasibility study presentation

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Complete the Broadband Feasibility Study worksheet

Other timely discussion on outstanding and upcoming tasks

Accelerate Broadband Feasibility Worksheet

What is the purpose of the feasibility study?

- Generate data to attract a broadband provider's interest and participation
- Generate data to support decision-making by a selected broadband provider partner
- Generate data to support decision-making around a community-owned network
- Generate data to allow public policy makers to select the best alternative from a range of options

What information do we need?

- Socioeconomic data
- Specific broadband market data: price, existing satisfaction, key customers, etc.
- Deployment costs for various technology alternatives to determine strategy
- Deployment costs for a specific technology alternative
- Financial modeling to determine public-sector finance requirements
- Detailed business plan for a publicly built, owned, and/or operated network
- Other _____

Who will pay for the study, direct it, and own the results?

- The community
- The community and a specific provider partner
- Community contribution to the specific provider partner, who will own the data

How will we select and manage the study consultant?

- Open Request for Proposal process under community purchasing rules
- Selected provider partner will select and manage the study process

Notes:

WEEK TEN: Federal and State Programs

Federal monies will be flowing to the states, and the designated state entities will directly fund broadband infrastructure projects in 2022 and beyond. Communities must be prepared to articulate their connectivity needs to support high-quality broadband projects. No matter the source of funds, a variety of eligibility criteria, policy priorities, agency practices, technical requirements, and other factors will drive the allocation of these funds. Multiple funding sources and programs may be required to ensure a comprehensive broadband solution for your area. Some application windows may be relatively short, so preparation will be key.

The goals for this meeting are:

- Inform community teams of current and upcoming grant opportunities
- Help them understand how GIS mapping systems will be critical to program design
- Motivate communities to develop local consensus on the prospective community roles, especially ownership models and financial participation

Pre-Session Homework

Identify current webinar or create a live webinar

Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

State and Federal Program overview

Guest experts: Experienced grant writers, broadband project development experts from providers and/or consultants, state broadband program staff, congressional staff, possibly federal program staff and grant-winning communities

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Federal Funding Chart, courtesy of Common Sense, can be found in the Benton Institute's *Accelerate* [Google Drive Folder](#).

Accelerate Federal and State Program Opportunities Worksheet

1. Which of these federal broadband programs are most compatible with our vision, prospective provider partners, project size, eligible uses, and timelines?
2. What state programs are available for broadband finance?
3. How can we use both federal and state funding to meet our objectives?
4. Do we have the capacity to pursue these programs on our own, or do we need technical and other consulting assistance?
5. What additional information do we need to gather?
6. What is our community willing to contribute as part of a financial package?
7. What is our best opportunity to pursue today?

WEEK ELEVEN: Local Broadband Finance Options

Local governments may need to provide their own financial contribution to make a project feasible. This session will help communities identify alternatives and weigh their options.

Local governments may have American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to contribute, on their own or in partnership with other area counties, cities, or townships. Some communities may decide that they will need to use other local resources, either through reserves, bonding supported through special assessments or increased general levy, or other financing tools. Each state has a unique set of infrastructure and economic development financing tools with specific legal uses and procedures.

The goals for this meeting are:

- Educate team members on local funding options and processes
- Facilitate discussion about the feasibility of using these programs to support broadband development in the community

Pre-Session Homework

Identify current webinar or create a live webinar

Meeting Agenda

LARGE GROUP

Welcome

News and events

Public finance expert presentation: What powers do local governments have to fund broadband projects in our state?

Local broadband finance examples and best practices

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

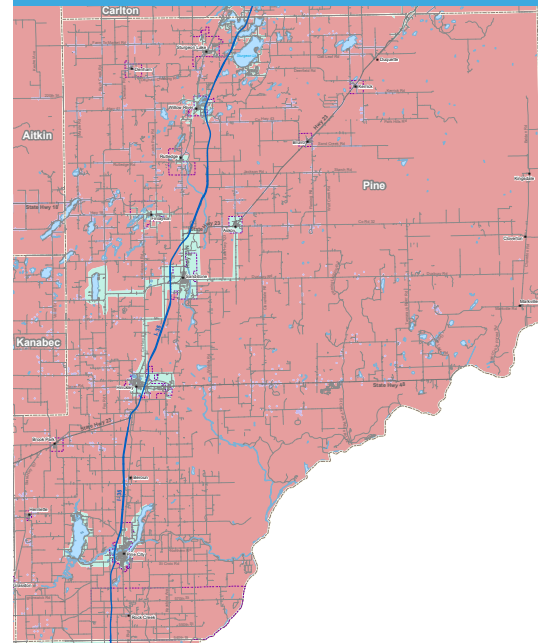
Complete the Local Broadband Finance worksheet

Accelerate Local Broadband Finance Worksheet

1. What finance/funding programs are available to our community?
2. Do we have the capacity to pursue these programs on our own, or do we need technical assistance?
3. Does our preferred program require matching funds?
4. What is our community willing to contribute as part of a financial package?
5. Does our community have the funding authority and capacity to assist on a broadband project?
6. Which of these powers are most compatible with our vision, prospective provider partners, project size, eligible uses, and timelines?
7. What additional information do we need to gather?

Planning and Collaboration Captures Opportunity

Pine County, Minnesota, is located in east central Minnesota, with lands that range from small farms to the boundary of Minnesota's north woods. Nicely situated between the Minneapolis–St. Paul and Duluth metro areas, Pine County is perfectly located to attract residents seeking the rural lifestyle with close connections to metro areas, except for broadband. Pine County currently ranks 86th out of 87 Minnesota counties for broadband that meets the state goal of 100 Mbps/20 Mbps. On the map, red indicates unserved areas.



WEEKS TWELVE and THIRTEEN: Local Planning Exercise

There are no cohort meetings in weeks twelve and thirteen. Instead, program staff facilitate planning sessions with individual community teams, as needed and desired, to finalize their *Accelerate* presentations. Program staff should plan for two two-hour planning sessions with each community. For some communities, one planning session may suffice because they have a well-defined community consensus on next steps. In this ideal case, a community will have created their vision, gathered their data, confirmed a willing broadband provider partner, settled on a technology, and identified a funding strategy. They are well on their way! The resulting presentation can be delivered as a success story with next steps and timelines.

Alternatively, a community may not have completed their information-gathering efforts or come to consensus on technology choices or an acceptable public sector role. In this case, a community may have more work to do to gather citizen or provider input or to identify a likely broadband provider partner. The community should fully utilize the expertise of program staff to identify options and next steps for gathering information and developing community consensus. The resulting presentation should be used as a way to communicate strategic options, key barriers, and prospective paths forward to elected officials and other stakeholders as a way to build community support and make crucial decisions.

Background

The goals for this meeting are:

- Review all information-gathering efforts and come to consensus as to relevance for community broadband strategy development
- Reach consensus on the broadband deployment strategy, including:
 - Targeted geography and specified technologies
 - Preferred partners and partnership structures
 - Likely funding mechanisms
 - Tasks and timelines
- Develop a presentation slide deck to effectively communicate the plan to community stakeholders

Meeting Agenda

Community Discussion facilitated by Community Broadband Coach

Pine County and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, through Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures, participated in the inaugural cohort of *Accelerate* communities. The Mille Lacs Band has tribal lands in Pine County, including a significant casino complex on Interstate 35 and a relatively remote village on the St. Croix River to the east. Through the *Accelerate* process, Pine County and Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures developed the necessary relationships and shared understanding to begin initial discussions about prospective partnership opportunities. While each had their own planning team, interactions were plentiful during *Accelerate* meetings and afterward.

Toward the completion of *Accelerate*, two distinct funding opportunities emerged. First, the State of Minnesota dedicated available federal funds through the Small Cities Development Program for broadband. The second was to submit



Accelerate Planning Outline and Worksheet

Community Broadband Vision Statement (insert here):

In the long term, we hope to accomplish (check all that apply):

- High-performance broadband everywhere in our area
- High-performance broadband in key areas with adequate broadband everywhere
- Improved broadband everywhere of at least 25/3 or 100/20 or 100/100 (pick one)
- Improved broadband for most of the unserved areas

In the short term (~18 months), we hope to accomplish (check all that apply):

- High-performance broadband everywhere in our area
- High-performance broadband in key areas with adequate broadband everywhere
- Improved broadband everywhere of at least 25/3 or 100/20 or 100/100 (pick one)
- Improved broadband for most of the unserved areas

Areas of our community/county are we focused on (list specific areas):

AREA	PROSPECTIVE PARTNER(S)	LIKELY TECHNOLOGY(IES)	PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

projects to members of Congress to be funded directly through the appropriations bill. In collaboration, Pine County and Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures were able to provide critical information in partnership with broadband providers so that two projects were funded through these very different pathways to federal funding. In all, over \$8 million was received for infrastructure deployment covering approximately 3,000 households in the very rural countryside of eastern Pine County.

By working together, these two entities—one a sovereign tribal government, the other a local unit of government—were able to tell a unique story that successfully attracted the interest of providers, funders, and elected officials. Pine County residents, including the Mille Lacs Band members residing in Pine County on tribal lands, are the beneficiaries of this collaboration.

What are the roles that our government can assume in project development?

	CITY	COUNTY	TOWNSHIP	OTHER REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY, TRIBE, JOINT POWERS BOARD, OTHER
Use ARPA funds				
Provide other funding				
Issue bonds				
Special assessment taxes				
Grant writing				
Purchase of broadband services				
Public ownership				
Shared ownership				
Market development				

Who are our key audiences for our plan?

What are our key messages to these audiences?

What objections can we anticipate?

What are our key responses to these objections?

WEEK FOURTEEN: Cohort Community Presentations

The goals of the *Accelerate* program are for communities to create a community broadband plan and then pursue implementation. This final meeting serves as the program capstone wherein the community teams share their plans with the other communities in the cohort. Each community will have 15–20 minutes to present their plan and receive feedback from the program coaches, state or other program sponsors, and the other communities.

Most communities will consider their plans, at this point, to be “in process” pending more information, provider discussions and negotiations, political processes, and other factors. Most likely, communities will have made very significant progress on improving their community broadband knowledge, developing policy, considering partnerships with providers, choosing the right technology, and more. This is to be celebrated!

The goals for this meeting are:

- Set a “deadline” for finalizing a community broadband plan
- Share the plan through a practice presentation session with a friendly and supportive audience
- Get positive and insightful feedback from a knowledgeable team
- Learn best practices from other communities to incorporate into future presentations

Meeting Agenda

Welcome and updates

Community presentations

(Depending on the size of the cohort, the presentations might be 15–20 minutes with 5–10 minutes for coach and cohort feedback.)

Adjourn

Next Steps in Your Accelerate Journey

1. Hold community presentations with city councils, county boards, and other audiences
2. Continue project development and provider discussions
3. Procure grant(s) and other funding
4. Implement project
5. Celebrate!

Infrastructure Might Not Be Enough!

While the *Accelerate* program focuses on broadband infrastructure deployment, communities need to recognize that it is how broadband is used that creates the value. Think of it this way: That exercise bicycle in your basement is your fitness infrastructure, but you must get on it and pedal to get any value from it. Your time and energy are still required to develop new habits and improve your fitness.

Diverse sets of strategies are required to achieved full digital equity.

AFFORDABILITY

- Communities can work with prospective broadband providers to increase the affordability of their subscription plans
- Communities can market the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) and help consumers successfully apply for the program. Waukegan, Illinois has hired a digital navigator to help residents with this approach.

DEVICES

- Communities can work with national nonprofits like PCs for People or local school districts to obtain free or low-cost computing devices.
- Communities can offer free or low-cost tech support to keep families' equipment in working order. The North Chicago School District 197 is a model for this approach.

TRAINING

- Communities—through libraries, schools, and nonprofits—can offer entry-level technology training, including helping people with email accounts, syncing devices, videoconferencing, school portals, and valuable apps
- Communities can provide a breadth of training to build the skills of the local workforce, from young students to older adults. The LatinX DLN organization in Summit, Illinois is actively engaged in this strategy using multiple grants and partnerships to fund the initiative.
- Economic development organizations and chambers of commerce can offer technology training to existing businesses and prospective entrepreneurs to help them manage their business operations and market their products and services

Accelerate Presentation Outline

(sample template included in the [Google Drive Folder](#))

Introduction

- Team members
- Urgent need
- Survey comments
- Vision statement
- Priority strategies

What have we learned?

- Maps and data
- Survey results
- Provider interviews

What are we going to do?

- Targeted geographic areas
- Strategy 1
- Strategy 2
- Strategy 3
- Community role
- Funding opportunity

Closing summary/Call to action

Accelerate Program Evaluations

Provide program leaders with two tools for evaluation:

- A mid-process survey to ask community leaders for an assessment of their progress and challenges. This survey is sent to the community team leader.
- A final survey to provide participants an opportunity to comment on the overall program and the value that it provided to the community. Respondents are offered an opportunity to make suggestions for program improvement. This survey is provided to all Accelerate team members.

Mid-Process *Accelerate* Feedback Survey (to Community Team Leaders)

Community Name:

Please paste your current Vision statement below (draft statements OK):

Please provide a brief update on your survey distribution and/or analysis.

Please provide a brief update on progress on interviewing potential broadband providers. Any exciting possibilities?

How is your team functioning?

Any general feedback for the *Accelerate* Consulting and Support Team?

What else can our team do to help you?

Final Accelerate Evaluation Survey (to All Team Members)

Congratulations, and thank you for stepping into the role of community broadband champion! Your community has completed the *Accelerate* program. Please share your thoughts on how the program has worked for you and your community.

Based on your community's participation in the *Accelerate* program:

	STRONGLY AGREE			STRONGLY DISAGREE		
Our community has an improved understanding of our present broadband situation.						
Our community has an improved understanding of alternative strategies to improve broadband, including the role our government can play in improving broadband.						
Our community has an improved relationship with one or more prospective broadband providers.						
Our community has a plan that will likely result in improved broadband.						
We still have a lot of work to do on our plan to make it useful.						
I learned a great deal about broadband and prospective solutions for our community.						
I feel more confident in my role in addressing my community's broadband issues.						
The archived webinars were of high value.						
The expert presentations were of high value.						
The weekly community planning time was of high value to our team.						
The final planning meetings were of high value.						
Would you recommend the <i>Accelerate</i> program to leaders in other communities?	YES			NO		
What parts of the <i>Accelerate</i> program were most helpful to you and your team? (open-ended)						
How can the <i>Accelerate</i> program be improved?						
How can (State or other program sponsor) continue to support your community broadband efforts? (open-ended)						

Accelerate Community Planning Resources

Online Video Webinar and Instructional Resources

Blandin Foundation

blandinfoundation.org/programs/broadband/blandin-community-broadband-program-webinar-series/

A wide-ranging video series covering broadband access, adoption, and use

Corning Community Broadband University

corning.com/fiber-to-the-premise/worldwide/en/home/knowledge-center/community-broadband-university.html

A set of vendor-produced videos illustrating fiber-to-the-home technologies and deployment trends

Fiber Broadband Association

fiberbroadband.org/page/fiber-for-breakfast

(Requires free non-member registration)

A series focusing on fiber broadband infrastructure deployment

Finley Engineering

finleyusa.com/broadband-industry-innovator-videos-4-part-series/

A new Broadband Industry Innovator series to gain insight into the fast-moving broadband marketplace

Illinois Extension/Benton Institute/Illinois Office of Broadband content

extension.illinois.edu/lge/community-broadband-development

A wide-ranging video series covering broadband access, adoption, and use from the Illinois Connected Communities and Illinois *Accelerate* programs

Documents/Web Resources

Benton Institute for Broadband & Society

benton.org

Research, analysis, and the latest news on all facets of broadband

Blandin Foundation

broadband.blandinfoundation.org

A variety of studies, tools, and other resources for community broadband development

CTC Technology & Energy

Gigabit Cities

ctcnet.us/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/GigabitCommunities.pdf

Technical strategies for facilitating public or private broadband construction

Institute for Local Self Reliance

ilsr.org/broadband-2/

An array of blog articles, case studies, and videos centered on community-oriented broadband

Next Century Cities

Broadband Toolkit

nextcenturycities.org/broadband-toolkit/

A broadband guide for community leaders

[GOOGLE DRIVE FOLDER](#) – Document repository for the Guidebook contains the worksheets and other *Accelerate* resources.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Bill Coleman, Founder, Community Technology Advisors, supports community economic development and broadband initiatives through innovative training, planning, and implementation programs. He was a lead staffer with the Minnesota Star City Program before shifting his focus to technology-based economic development. Bill's current clients include national community broadband leaders Blandin

Foundation and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, where he acts as community coach to the *Illinois Connected Communities* and *Accelerate* programs.

In community and professional service, Bill is on the board of PCs for People, a national digital inclusion nonprofit based in Minnesota, an analyst and juror for the Intelligent Community Forum, and chair of TEDxMahtomedi.



Broadband Delivers Opportunities
and Strengthens Communities