

Bowling's Battle for Broadband

by

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In 2014 during my first legislative session as Director of Government Relations for TMEPA, I was part of a meeting regarding a bill that would expand where municipal electric systems could offer internet service. Most of the meeting attendees represented private telecommunications, the usual suspects that we all know. They were all assembled to confront the bill sponsor, Sen. Janice Bowling of Tullahoma.

Sen. Bowling was someone I had only brief interaction with, so I did not know her very well. However, I knew who she was up against: some of the biggest interest groups who were also some of the biggest campaign check writers. When these lobbyists spoke, legislators had to listen. Sen. Bowling was a freshman legislator in just her second year as a state senator going against about as formidable a political opponent as one could find. This wasn't just David versus Goliath. This was David versus a group of Goliaths.

As each person spoke against her bill, I could see why the issue of municipal electric internet expansion and local internet choice has always faced a tough road. As the discussion moved around the table, the private telecommunication companies unloaded all their barrels on Sen. Bowling, using the same arguments that has bottled up legislation that would allow for more Tennesseans to have better internet service. This was the same game plan that had been executed year after year. But this year, the game plan didn't take into account one key piece – a legislator that only wanted to do the right thing by her constituents and all Tennesseans.

Sen. Bowling had been exposed firsthand to municipal electric systems and the choice communities face when they want better internet service. As a member of the Tullahoma Utilities Board (TUB), Janice Bowling was actually against her community offering internet service before she was for it. When TUB proposed a hybrid fiber/coaxial internet system, Bowling thought that technology wasn't right for Tullahoma. However, several years later when TUB proposed an all fiber system, Bowling voted to approve to project because she knew fiber optic technology would handle the needs of Tullahoma for decades into the future. Her knowledge of the benefits of what fiber and high speed broadband could bring to a community would be put to use again.

As each interest group and its lobbyist/representative brought their legislative ammunition to bear on Sen. Bowling, she did something they didn't usually see from legislators – she returned fire. She talked about the need for more high speed broadband in rural areas, the need for more competition, and the need for local choice. Most of all, she talked about wanting to help her constituents and all Tennesseans have access to the utility of the 21st century – high speed broadband. Sen. Bowling used her knowledge of what fiber and TUB's internet service had done for her community to stand up to private telecommunication companies like no legislator had done before. It was something I had not seen in my time around the legislature, and everyone in that room understood she was a game changer on this issue.

Sen. Bowling's bill didn't pass in 2014, and she now says she is happier for it. That bill was limited in how it would allow municipal electric broadband expansion, but her efforts and her passion created momentum that continued into 2015 and soon into 2016 around expanded legislation that allows municipal electric broadband to expand just like other utilities to meet the needs of a community. Because

of Sen. Bowling and her efforts, all municipal electric systems through TMEPA are now engaged in the fight to bring high speed internet access to more Tennesseans. The momentum she created has gotten the attention of more legislators than ever before, and her crusade on this issue has caused municipal electric broadband expansion to find more allies like Tennessee Farm Bureau and countless local officials and economic development groups.

As a sign of TMEPA's appreciation for all her efforts, TMEPA President Brian Skelton and Executive Director Mike Vinson presented Sen. Bowling the Power of Excellence Award at a recent dinner hosted by TUB. The plaque as presented to Sen. Bowling said, "In recognition and appreciation of your unwavering commitment, resolute leadership, and fervent passion to improve the lives of your constituents and all Tennesseans through access to high-speed broadband, the utility of the 21st century." The award was a small token of appreciation for everything Sen. Bowling has done, but as she said that night the fight is not over. Legislation supported by TMEPA and Tennessee's municipal electric broadband providers that allows for more internet service and more internet options is still bottled up in the Tennessee General Assembly. Her leadership on this issue is still needed to get the legislation passed so that more Tennesseans can have better internet service. We are lucky to have a sponsor like Sen. Bowling, and her biggest reward for her efforts will be standing beside the governor when he signs her legislation she has fought so hard for.

