

Small Cities and Rural Towns Pursing the Freedom to Become Fiber Optic Communities Find a Voice through TN4Fiber.org

By Brian Skelton

The United States continues to fall behind when it comes to deploying the infrastructure needed to deliver modern Internet, video, and voice offerings, according to the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) 2015 Broadband Progress Report. Fiber optic broadband solutions are by far the fastest and most reliable option, and yet a large portion of the homes, businesses and schools in the United States are forced to function on obsolete network technologies. Meanwhile, millions more have little or no reliable Internet access, including rural areas where the FCC's 2015 report finds that more than 50 percent of rural Americans lack access to high-speed broadband.

As states and communities consider how to provide the fast, reliable networks necessary to [compete for jobs](#) and support educational advancement, seven of our Tennessee municipal electric utilities have pioneered an extremely successful model for deploying fiber optic infrastructure. These community-based providers are more than covering the cost of the construction of their networks through customer-generated revenues, while making this model work across urban, suburban and even rural residences, effectively providing service to everyone in the area.

In contrast, traditional telecommunications providers, which received exclusive rights for fiber optic expansion through the Telecommunications Act of 1996, did not launch residential fiber services in Tennessee until this year, and they only proposed launches in communities already served with fiber optics provided by either a municipal utility or another non-incumbent, such as Google Fiber.

With this in mind, cities and counties across Tennessee are prompting their lawmakers to do away with the nearly 20-year-old law which currently prevents municipal electric utilities from expanding fiber services beyond their existing service footprint to serve outlying communities. Without this restriction in place, utilities will be able to answer the public need for greater access to fiber optic broadband.

In today's world, competitive Internet is as important as good roads to our communities' ability to attract industry and support existing business growth; educate our young people; re-train our adults for emerging job opportunities and facilitate healthcare delivery. Fiber optic networks provide key competitive advantages for addressing all of these community challenges, which are some of the toughest that we face as Tennesseans.

Other states are also recognizing just how critical a robust fiber optic network is to a community's progress and ongoing vitality. Just last week, Alabama Governor Robert Bentley committed to investing in critical broadband infrastructure with the announcement of a new Office of Broadband Development to push the spread of high-speed Internet across the state. Mississippi and Florida governors have also recently announced efforts to expand fiber networks. Still, despite the world's most advanced Internet technology being available in seven

“Tennessee Fiber Optic Communities,” it remains out of reach for most small towns and rural areas.

These seven Tennessee Fiber Optic Communities— Bristol, Chattanooga, Clarksville, Jackson, Morristown, Pulaski and Tullahoma – are home to successful, municipally-owned fiber optic networks and have seen visible growth due to their fiber optic capabilities. Each community is prepared to partner with its neighbors to expand this critical infrastructure into under-serviced areas, aiming to improve our communities and make them competitive for business on a regional, national and international scale.

Through the Tennessee Fiber Optic Communities’ statewide grassroots movement— TN4Fiber.org— communities fighting for the right to choose fiber for their future are finding a voice. To learn more about how you can help make a difference in the fight to give local leaders the freedom to choose what is best for their community, visit the Tennessee Fiber Optic Communities [website](#), or follow the group’s [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) sites. For more information or to receive updates on the effort, call 1-844-528-7597.