



Preparing for Broadband

Broadband is vital to people’s ability to live, work, and learn everywhere, including the Northern Forest. The COVID-19 pandemic elevated the need for broadband as more people work, learn, and access services remotely. However, the limited population density in the Northern Forest region drives up the cost of connecting homes and businesses, leaving many lacking adequate broadband connections.

The Northern Forest Center gathered four experts to discuss their approach to broadband expansion. Panelists included **Brad Roscoe** of [Chesterfield, NH](#), **Dave Wolf** of [Development Authority of the North Country](#), **Christa Shute** of [NEK Broadband](#), and **Mia Purcell** of [Community Concepts Finance Corporation](#).

“The fight for public infrastructure is worth it, and the people in your town are worth it. This is a long term investment...We have a moral obligation to find ways to use these funds to last us into the future.”
Christa Shute, Northeast Kingdom Broadband

This group explained that:

- New post-pandemic funding from federal and state sources has created opportunities to pursue expanded broadband infrastructure, but **funding will go only to communities that are ready.**
- Service providers can be a great place to start acquiring mapping and network data, but often they don’t have a good handle on their own service area or that of their competition. **Local work is necessary to fill those data gaps.**
- Wired connections are not the only technology available. Wireless solutions may be appropriate in some places.
- **Waiting for for-profit providers to fill the service gaps won’t always work.** Many are unable to expand their networks due to debt limitations. Also, the economics of rural network expansion provide little financial incentive for business. However, for-profit entities can provide important pieces of the puzzle such as accurate mapping or new trunk lines, and some towns can provide the necessary capital through municipal bonds, helping to bridge the gap and improve service.
- There is no one-size-fits-all solution, so it pays to **think creatively about how to fund, build, and maintain a network.**

“People need to be aggressive, progressive, active. Set goals, form a committee, get engaged, and take this on yourself.”
Mia Purcell, Community Concepts Finance Corporation

These community leaders agreed that good collaboration and data are critical to successfully expanding broadband coverage in the region. Their advice includes:

- **Organize a committee** as one of the first steps. This should include residents, town officials, business owners, and ideally representatives of local service providers.
- **Set clear goals** within the committee for what the ultimate outcome should be. Is it 100% coverage? Is it affordability for those with service? Is it a service to every student?
- **Raise broad public support** through ongoing community engagement, since there will likely need to be funding from the town. Host information sessions, post notices in the newspaper, share meeting minutes.
- **Map which companies are providing service and where**, both for convincing residents about the importance of the work but also to help tell the story to funders and prospective service providers.
- **Provide residents with a way to perform a speed test** on their existing service and have a way to collect that data.
- **Partner with existing service providers** where possible to improve service quickly.
- **Work regionally and across town lines** to increase efficiency and cut costs, especially in more rural areas with low population density.
- **Conduct “boots on the ground” work**, either through volunteers or paid contractors, to map out existing networks.

The leaders we spoke with made it clear that expanding broadband to rural corners of the region is a goal within reach – though it will take an especially high level of collaboration and tenacity to achieve.

For additional resources and information concerning broadband infrastructure throughout the region, see this helpful [Broadband Planning Resource Guide](#) developed by the Northern Forest Center.



The Community Learning Briefs summarize the Northern Forest Center’s 2021-2023 “Building the New Forest Future” webinar series. The Preparing for Broadband webinar and others in this series are available [here](#). This project has been supported in part by USDA Rural Development.