



NORA Broadband Initiative Advances in Niagara and Orleans counties

By Lynne Johnson
Orleans Legislator



and David Godfrey
Niagara Legislator

Stakeholders from the Niagara-Orleans Regional Alliance (NORA) recently reviewed findings from an intensive study designed to identify addresses without access to terrestrial broadband Internet services throughout Orleans County and the towns of Cambria, Hartland, Lockport, Newfane, Porter, Royalton and Somerset in Niagara County.

NORA leadership began coordinating participation with multiple municipalities in 2012 through a study helmed by Evhen Tupis of BPGreene & Associates. BPGreene's study involved gathering public data and augmenting it with regional drive-through information, along with interviewing area home and business owners. The findings actually revealed 3,921 unserved addresses between both counties that the current New York Broadband Map previously claimed was almost 100-percent covered. Cable and Internet providers are able to report to the state that an entire census block has Internet coverage, even if only one house on the block has Internet access. This practice results in inflated reports of addresses with coverage. Typically, NYS controls how the data is presented; yet NORA has recently shown that this is a faulty approach. NYS has verbally accepted our survey results and is now willing to update their maps with NORA's more extensive data. This will allow Niagara and Orleans counties to re-qualify for grant funding that would otherwise not be available.

With the rural areas of Niagara and Orleans counties barely 65-70 percent covered, high-speed broadband Internet throughout both counties is essential. Therefore, NORA stakeholders requested the Orleans County Land Restoration Corporation (OLRC) use the study data to seek Requests-for-Proposals (RFP) from last-mile Internet providers. Regionally, it was well-known that there were unserved areas, but it was startling to see the full scope documented so concretely. The formal study enabled the OLRC to release an RFP with authority. Once the proposals are evaluated, NORA collaborators can openly pursue funding channels.

The RFP represents an open and competitive process in which stakeholders invited over 20 last-mile broadband and telecommunication providers to submit proposals to provide service to both counties. The proposal stressed that the intended purpose is the "installation of 'last mile' infrastructure," which is required to permit 100 percent coverage to our unserved areas. The RFP went on to detail that this was in no way a proposal for "middle-mile" Internet solutions. If the problem is going to be solved, legislators from Orleans and Niagara insist it needs to be resolved in its entirety in both counties.

A proposed solution could be providing broadband access wirelessly through a network of servers mounted on tall structures. The BPGreene survey listed structures over 40 feet tall throughout both counties, which might be sufficient for transmitters. NORA is also pursuing grants to outweigh the cost of bringing broadband to these rural areas.

With the passage of New York Proposition 3, it is clear that the state is 100-percent behind efforts such as the NORA initiative. The bond proposition allows the state to borrow up to \$2 billion for technological projects in schools. Proposition 3 focuses on "smart schools" and bringing new technology to educational institutions. It is simply not good enough to put technology in schools, often times children are unable to do their homework because their residence is part of an unserved area. By working with school districts throughout Orleans and Niagara, NORA will also be able to help schools to identify where broadband is needed in order to "reach the last child," and assist districts in negotiating coverage with ISP vendors.

Respondents were asked to quote both the local cost and conditions to meet the initiatives' goals. Each proposal will be evaluated before a go-forward plan is pursued, in order to assure that implementation can stand on its own and requires no long-term taxpayer subsidy. The project scope explains that the proposals need to be fair and that the cost of broadband Internet service should be no greater than equivalent service from nearby terrestrial broadband Internet providers. NORA stakeholders have made it clear that we are not looking for companies to come in and provide unreliable service for an unfair cost. The RFP goes on to explain that the broadband Internet service limitations shall be no more restrictive than equivalent limits from nearby incumbent terrestrial broadband Internet providers.

The Internet has become a significant force in the quality of daily life for Americans. The Internet is no longer something that can be looked at as simply entertainment or a luxury. A 2013 Department of Commerce report details how Internet access and use has a measurable impact on employment, health, income, consumer welfare and civic engagement. The data further suggests that Internet use benefits individuals, society and the nation's economy while "individuals who lack connectivity find themselves at a significant disadvantage compared with their peers." The goal of the NORA initiative is to provide residents, small and agri-businesses, students and each county's rural tourism industries with Internet service that is equal to that of the more metropolitan areas throughout New York State. 🏠