

small community



Pictured: Street view of the town of Glenwood, WA. A meadow in Glenwood Valley with Mt Adams in the background. Linda Williams and Brian Wanless Telecom Committee founding members.

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BIG Broadband

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"It will cost \$1 million to bring broadband to this town and there just isn't a business case to do that," was what community members in Glenwood, Washington, were repeatedly told. Located at the foot of Mt. Adams, 35 miles from the Columbia River, Glenwood is a geographically isolated small town of about 500. Forestry and agriculture have dominated local commerce, but given the decline in these industries, community members have been looking for new business opportunities and ways to keep or attract younger people.

Although securing broadband is a challenge even in more densely populated regions, Glenwood leaders knew it was vital for economic diversification and reducing the "brain drain." The community had tackled tough issues before and in 2007 the hard work began to acquire high-speed Internet access.

With a double-digit poverty rate, Glenwood was already one of 40 Washington rural communities participating in Horizons, a Northwest Area Foundation poverty reduction and leadership capacity-building program led in the state by Washington State University Extension. As part of the program, residents participated in research to determine community satisfaction, identify ways to improve the quality of life, and create prosperity. In Glenwood, and the eight other Horizons communities in the Columbia Gorge region, job creation was identified as the top need.

Based on this research and input about the importance of broadband identified during other local Horizons activities, staff from WSU Extension Horizons and the WSU Division of Governmental Studies and Services Program for Digital Initiatives (PDI) formed a telecommunications committee in November 2007. The committee expanded to include neighboring Skamania County in 2010 and often has participation of community leaders from across the Columbia River in Oregon.

Linda Williams, WSU Extension Community Coach, leads the telecommunications committee that includes representatives from economic development, telecommunications, nonprofits, education, libraries, local and state government, as well as Horizons participants. "I am not a technology expert," says Williams, "but like so much of the work we do in Extension, my role is to bring together community members, identify local resources, and tap expertise within the university so we can work together to improve our communities."

Brian Wanless, Horizon community leader, and one of the founding members of the telecommunications committee explains, "The goal of the committee is to have broadband available to all who want it and at an affordable rate." Committee efforts focus on three main areas: 1) increased awareness about the relevance of broadband; 2) expanded access to high speed Internet; and 3) community education to increase broadband adoption or use.

The first committee project was to assist Glenwood in securing high-speed Internet. Jay McLaughlin, telecommunications committee member and Executive Director of Mt. Adams Resource Stewards (MARS), a non-profit that addresses concerns Glenwood citizens have about the future of the community, leads the local effort.

In 2008, McLaughlin began mentoring Jimmie Smith, a high school senior who chose a community broadband assessment for his culminating project. Smith worked with McLaughlin and WSU PDI staff to develop a household survey. In the letter accompanying the survey Smith wrote, "The focus of my senior project is to determine how technological advancement, namely improved access to high-speed Internet, could benefit the Glenwood community." The survey asked critical questions about current Internet access and use, interest in obtaining additional services, and how much residents were willing to pay for these improvements.

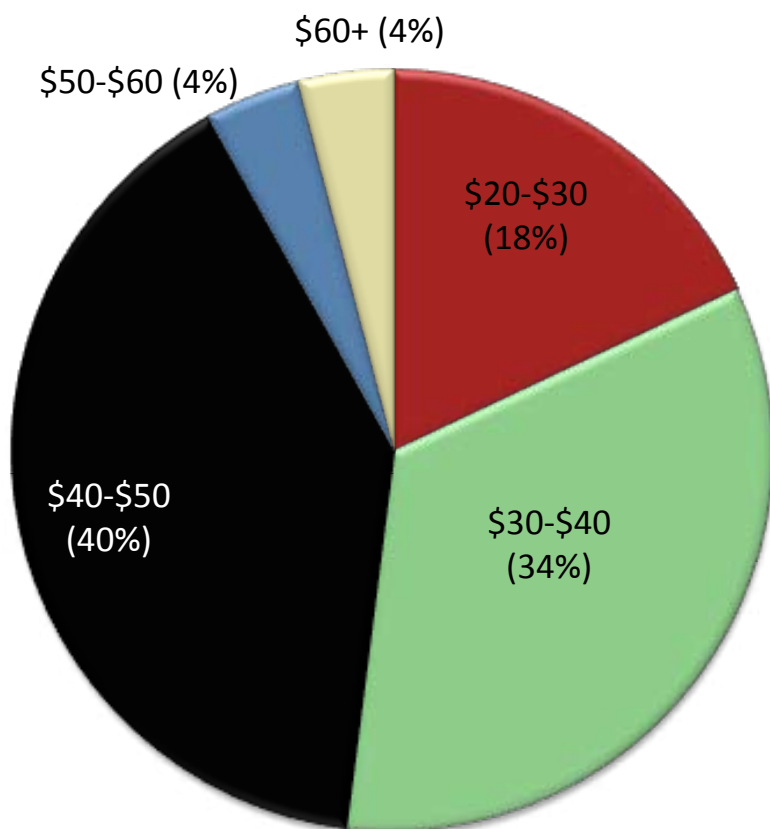
Surveys were mailed to all postal box holders in Glenwood and an envelope at the post office served as the collection point. Of the 215 surveys distributed, 77 were returned. Smith and McLaughlin analyzed the data that revealed that 94 percent of the respondents were interested in acquiring new high-speed Internet. Key to building the business case was that almost half of the respondents reported they would pay \$40 or more per month for broad-

band (Figure 1). Even so, this did not justify the \$1 million initial investment needed for a private telecommunications company to bring broadband to town. McLaughlin shared the results of the Glenwood survey with the telecommunications committee. The high interest from residents and need to continue developing the business case for deployment convinced the committee that a county-wide broadband assessment was necessary. Based on the Glenwood approach, the committee adapted the survey for use throughout Klickitat County. Staff from the Klickitat Public Utility District (PUD) had been actively involved in the telecommunications committee and agreed to provide in-kind support for the project. The PUD

included an article about the telecommunications committee and announced the planned survey in the March 2008 issue of Ruralite, a monthly magazine sent to all PUD customers. Surveys were distributed by the PUD in the April utility bills. Completed surveys were returned with customer payments. Approximately 9600 homes received surveys and about 1200 responded.

As a former teacher, committee member Wanless was able to solicit junior and senior high students to help tally surveys. When asked, 52 percent of respondents reported dissatisfaction with current Internet service, with slowness as the top reason. Affordability was

How much would you be willing to pay per month for new or alternative high-speed Internet service?



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Figure 1. Glenwood, WA Survey Results.

"In March 2010, an \$84.3 million statewide NTIA grant was awarded which included \$3.7 million for fiber optic middle-mile in Klickitat and Skamania counties."

identified as a significant challenge, both the cost of Internet access and computer ownership (Figure 2). The study also identified the need for community education about the relevance of broadband in everyday life and training to help increase computer literacy.

With this valuable data in hand, the announcement about the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) federal stimulus funding for broadband seemed like the perfect opportunity to finally provide Glenwood and other areas in the Columbia Gorge with high-speed Internet service. Brian Adams, the Manager of Sawtooth Technologies, LLC. and long-time telecommunications committee member, agreed to develop a business plan and pursue the funding. According to Adams, "At Sawtooth Technologies we are interested in projects where broadband services have never been deployed." His local ISP partnered with committee members and NoaNet, a non-profit wholesale telecommunications provider, to submit a U.S. Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) proposal. In March 2010,

an \$84.3 million statewide NTIA grant was awarded which included \$3.7 million for fiber optic middle-mile in Klickitat and Skamania counties.

At the July 2011 committee meeting, it was announced that broadband would be available in Glenwood in the first quarter of 2012. According to Adams, "As part of the NoaNet project we are placing a new tower with a backbone wireless link to service the Glenwood area which, for the first time, will deliver high-speed Internet and cellular service to the valley." This was welcome news to committee members. Wanless commented, "When we first started down this path I didn't think I'd see broadband available in rural parts of this region in my lifetime." He now believes it is achievable.

Glenwood is well on its way to receiving high-speed Internet but there is still a great deal of work to do. To help people understand the critical role of broadband in the region, the committee held its first workshop entitled "Rural Jobs in the New Economy." WSU Extension served as the sponsor and it was led by WSU PDI staff. The workshop featured a panel of local business and education leaders presenting information about current broad-

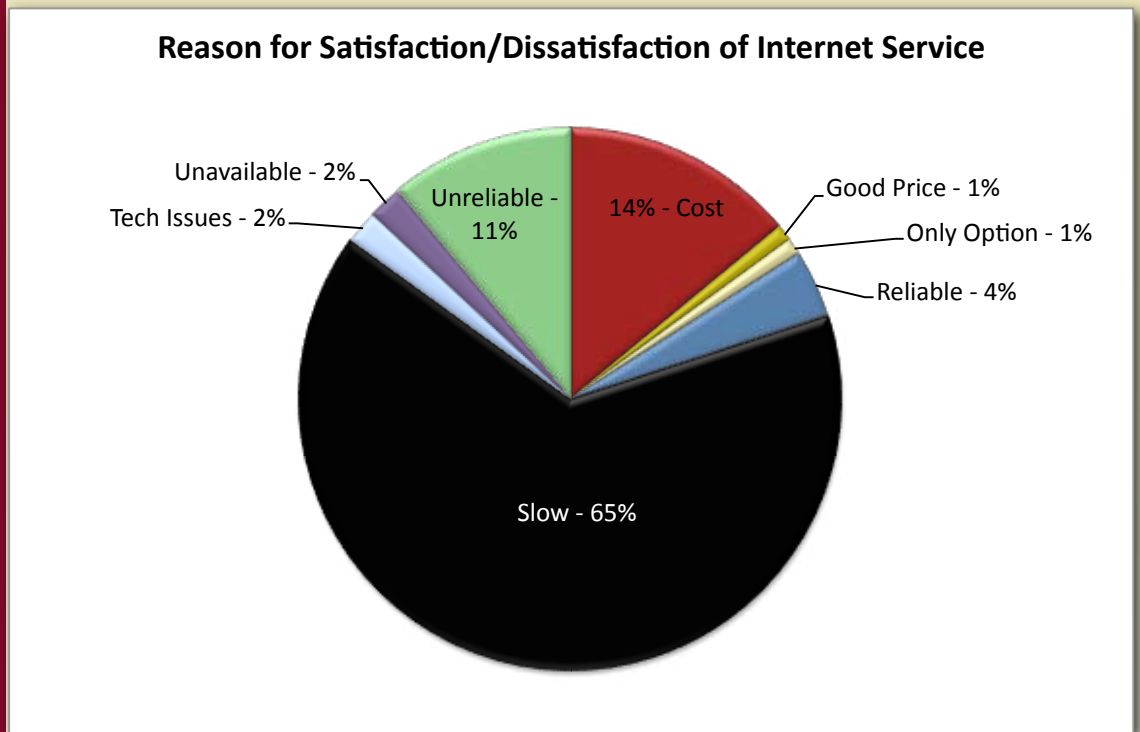


Figure 2. Klickitat County, WA Survey Results.

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band uses and additional needs. Attendees provided input to the committee about next steps to increase broadband access and adoption.

County Extension leaders are well-positioned to lead broadband efforts. When the committee identifies gaps in its membership, the network of community connections already in place through Extension helps bring the right people to the table. “Because broadband touches so many areas of our lives from social to educational to economical to access to government services, I have found that many of the people and organizations I am already working with either want to be involved or can recommend people to work with us to help increase broadband,” explains Williams.

As needs arise beyond the local area, Williams can count on WSU PDI staff to provide assistance. PDI facilitated involvement of the Washington State Broadband Office (WSBO), the state agency responsible for broadband coordination, programming, outreach, funding, and education. WSBO staff has traveled to participate in committee meetings on several occasions. When asked about the committee efforts, Wilford Saunders, WSBO Broadband Policy and Program Director said this, “Washington is a diverse state geographically and digitally, and it’s often the pragmatic, local focus of a team like the Klickitat-Skamania Telecommunications Committee that bridges gaps in the most effective and cost-efficient way.”

WSBO staff have seen first-hand how this Extension-led local telecommunications committee makes a difference. “During our ses-

sions with the group my team and I have been thrilled to see educators talking with economic development experts, wireless and wireline broadband providers working out the details that have framed a business case and are now building out very contemporary broadband services,” said Saunders.

The committee is also helping the WSBO better understand issues and needs at the local level. Saunders explains, “This telecommunications group has been a key point of reference for the WSBO over the last year and more, providing insights into the challenges of community technology planning and the workability of simple solutions.”

By developing a collaborative, local leadership team; establishing state and federal connections early in the process; identifying the business case based on consumer input; and, incorporating community Extension education as a critical element to increase broadband use, the region is ready to take full advantage of new high-speed Internet investments. County Extension leaders across the U.S. can benefit from the lessons learned by the Klickitat-Skamania Telecommunications Committee. This approach is a solid, replicable model that can benefit rural regions around the country.

And, as for Jimmie Smith, the high school student who three years ago worked on the region’s first broadband effort—he was delighted to learn that his hometown will soon receive broadband and that his work has been an inspiration to others. ●

RECOMMENDED READING

Washington State University
Extension Division of
Governmental Studies &
Services Program for Digital
Initiatives
dgss.wsu.edu/DigInIt.html

Communities Connect
Broadband Planning
Curriculum
[srcd.msstate.edu/
e-commerce/curricula/
connectingcommunities](http://srcd.msstate.edu/e-commerce/curricula/connectingcommunities)

Broadband USA
ntia.doc.gov

National Broadband Plan
broadband.gov/plan

U.S. Department of
Commerce NTIA State
Broadband Data and
Development Program
ntia.doc.gov/SBDD

Washington State Broadband
Office
broadband.wa.gov