



**GARFIELD & MESA  
COUNTIES BROADBAND  
PLANNING,  
COMMUNITY  
ENGAGEMENT  
MEETINGS**

A SUMMARY REPORT OF COMMUNITY  
OUTREACH MEETINGS THROUGHOUT  
GARFIELD AND MESA COUNTIES.

SUBMITTED BY NEO CONNECT

# Garfield & Mesa Counties Broadband Planning, Community Engagement Meetings

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JULY, 2016

## Garfield and Mesa Counties Broadband Planning Community Outreach Meetings

Community engagement is an important part of the ongoing broadband planning efforts in Garfield and Mesa Counties. During the first half of June, Garfield and Mesa Counties invited the community to participate in an open dialogue throughout the counties. Meetings were held according to industry segments and attendees were engaged in focused discussions regarding the current broadband environment. Discussions explored a variety of topics including current broadband infrastructure and services, business needs and challenges, and expectations for increased demand. Additionally, attendees were asked to complete one of two surveys hosted on the City website - one for residential users, the other for commercial applications. A summary of the survey results is provided as a companion report to this report.

Meetings were divided into two basic group types: Industry-Specific and Public. Garfield County hosted four separate meeting days including day-long, industry-specific events in Rifle and Glenwood, and hour-long public discussions in New Castle and Carbondale. Mesa County hosted four separate days of outreach meetings as well, kicking off with a three hour, business and industry event in Grand Junction, and followed by hour-long, public meetings in DeBeque, Collbran and Fruita.

Discussions were facilitated by Diane Kruse, Steven Burkholder and Bob Duchon of NEO Connect. Event venues were coordinated with Rick Corsi of Mesa County and Kevin Batchelder, of Garfield County.

### Industry-Specific Groups

Industry-specific meetings were held in Garfield County at the Glenwood Springs Library on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, and at the Rifle Library on June 10<sup>th</sup>. Below are the industries that were targeted for each meeting:

- General business/professional
- Internet Service Providers
- Health care
- Education
- E-Government

Mesa County combined the above groups into a three-hour long business and industry event on June 2. This condensed format was chosen to avoid duplicating recent efforts made by the City of Grand Junction, which hosted two days of these meetings for its own planning in February.

## Public/Citizen Groups

The public meetings were organized as an open forum for the general public. NEO Connect provided an overview of current broadband planning efforts and offered possible timelines for the finalizing of decisions and possible implementation. Attendees were encouraged to take the broadband survey and speed test located on the county websites.

## Core Discussion Topics

The meetings focused on industry-specific issues, as well as the following core areas:

- Current broadband infrastructure: availability, capability, and capacity
- Business needs, challenges, opportunities and applications
- Public/Private Partnerships and other development options
- Funding mechanisms available for government entities
- Future growth and scalability

## Summaries of Feedback and Input

### Mesa County - Grand Junction

These discussions were held as two separate events, the first was a business-specific meeting, followed by an open forum for the general public.

The business and industry specific meeting was well attended with a number of different business types and sizes being represented. Although some of the firms represented have as many as twenty employees, many are sole proprietorships. Many of those are home-based businesses, with as much as 40% of all businesses in rural Colorado operating as such. Technology oriented companies included several consulting firms, a video production service and a broadband communications startup company, called 32 Waves.

Additionally, in attendance was Colorado State Representative Dan Thurlow, who spoke briefly about local broadband concerns. He detailed the differences in quality of service between the City of Grand Junction and the unincorporated areas such as Clifton. The takeaway from this part of the conversation, which seemed to be widely agreed upon, was that price is a more relevant issue within the city, whereas availability of broadband is of greater concern in the outlying areas.

Hoptocopter Films of Grand Junction was one of the companies in attendance that struggles with bandwidth issues. They use centralized services for file storage and for customer service, with typical monthly uploads of between 2 and 4 Terabytes of data. As a small business, affordability of broadband services is a fundamental issue for the company. Brian Watson, Communications Director for the company, described how they make regular trips to Montrose to use the high-speed broadband at the public co-working facility, the Proximity Space. He described the three-hour, round-trip drive and associated expenses as being a total lower

cost/higher productivity than that of working from their Grand Junction office with inadequate service.

During the public portion of the day's discussions, several attendees discussed their frustration with current broadband services. One of these, a County employee, detailed the lack of redundancy in the Grand Junction area and its impact on vital government services. Damage to Charter's fiber-backbone circuit caused a large service outage last year that affected all County offices. This blackout created a months-long backlog of work in a number of departments because of critical missed deadlines. This in turn directly impacted Mesa County citizens, dependent upon vital services provided by the County.

Throughout the dialog there was broad discussion about economic development in Mesa County. Most attendees were in agreement that the issue of inadequate services must be addressed in order to attract new businesses, and to retain current ones. Even a representative with Century Link indicated that their financial modeling had failed to accurately forecast current internet demand.

Along with a focus on the core issues of infrastructure, applications, collaboration and funding, these groups engaged in a detailed discussion of the available service levels and pricing models, and business services like VoIP and videoconferencing. Moreover, many of the firms present use centralized, online, data services in some form on a daily basis. These services include applications for every type of business process from simple email and word processing to advanced communication and data storage tools.

## Mesa County – DeBeque, Collbran & Fruita

### **Public Meetings**

These public meetings were organized as an open forum for the general public.

During these discussions multiple attendees discussed their frustration with the current broadband environment, citing lack of availability, high cost, and poor reliability of services as their chief concerns. Those in attendance, including the town manager, a town trustee, a former mayor, and the Chief of EMS agreed that advanced and affordable broadband service is critical to attracting new residents and businesses, and for providing up-to-date public services. In Collbran and Fruita, town managers discussed the impact of inadequate broadband services in terms of both economic development and public safety.

Chief of DeBeque EMS, Mike Harvey is concerned that his department's new facilities will not have adequate broadband services when they take occupancy later this year. This is the basic connectivity that is critical for accessing data and communications management services. Currently, they operate from the downtown location with DSL, while there is no hard-wire service yet available for the new facility on the south side of Interstate 70. He identified the

importance of internet for their new \$200,000 station alert system, which typically operates on cellular paging services that are widely unavailable throughout the district. In recent talks with local providers, it is not apparent that a cost effective solution exists for this small town's needs. He is concerned also that there are current or upcoming bandwidth issues throughout this part of the County, including Plateau Valley Fire Department and Lower Valley Fire Department.

One of the attendees is both a town trustee and local business owner. Her hotel, The Robbers Roost, has internet access with CenturyLink and struggles to provide acceptable services to guests. Adequate bandwidth for the property when at full occupancy is not currently available at an affordable price. Additionally, she spoke favorably of the town's previous efforts around 2006 to provide wireless service to downtown residents via T1 and T2 lines and hotspot services at town hall. The initial T1 line was quickly over capacity which prompted installation of the T2 line. Residents paid roughly \$50.00/month for the service. Ultimately the service was discontinued, with maintenance costs exceeding budget, following the downturn in the local economy. She believes that the larger number of DeBeque residents would be willing to pay \$50-60.00/month for broadband services from the town if it was offered. Town Manager Lance Stewart, spoke about the town's inability to attract new residents, particularly home workers with current service offerings. Having a wireless offering downtown might be an inexpensive solution that Stewart would put before the town.

Residents of Collbran showed up in force to voice their concerns and frustrations with local internet service. Attendees included, among others, business owners, a school teacher and a principal, and a Job Corps employee. Complaints included lack of availability, signal and service quality issues, cost and overall lack of options. ISPs in the area include the Wireless Provider, Mesa Airnet, Brainstorm and Century Link. Available service levels range from 1.5 to 15 Mbps download and 0.2-15 Mbps in upload speeds. Century Link charges as much as \$100.00/month for their 1.5 Mbps service. It became apparent during the meeting that Century Link's pricing plans vary widely throughout the Plateau Valley. 10 Mbps runs over \$200 per month with either Brainstorm or Century Link.

One couple in attendance has a significantly greater bandwidth need than can be provided by the current providers. He is a high school principal in Grand Junction and she is a teacher at Plateau Valley School. She indicated that the technology in Collbran is spotty at best and limited bandwidth is definitely a common problem for the town's residents. She added that the available services are currently maxed out at the school with a student body armed with Chromebooks. Also, speeds plummet around 5 p.m. when everybody gets home and students and parents alike are trying to get work done on the Internet at the same time. In addition to overcoming time-of-day bandwidth shortages, the Collbran Town Administrator wants to have

access to greater bandwidth to conduct training webinars for town staff and events. Current bandwidth and speeds are inadequate for this task, resulting in extra costs when employees need to go to Grand Junction or Denver for training.

Attendees at the Fruita meeting discussed inadequate connectivity and bandwidth in their town, along with the lack of service options and high costs. Mike Bennett, the City Manager, discussed the City's efforts to opt out of SB152 and a representative from the Colorado Canyons Hospital & Medical Center talked about the unreasonably high costs of existing services and the need for competition to lower prices and improve service.

City Manager Mike Bennett is interested in less expensive alternatives. There are a large number of at-home businesses in the community which need Internet service. Sixty (60) new business permits have been pulled since January, with 50%-60% of those being at-home businesses. Bennett and the Fruita Mayor share economic development responsibilities, as well as recruitment activities. They are actively trying to recruit new businesses to the area, while at the same time promoting the quality of life.

The Hospital uses telehealth funding for its CenturyLink connection. The majority of Colorado Canyons' records are stored in Kansas City. Speeds of at least 100 Mbps are ideal for this type of records management. Prices from CenturyLink and Charter for 50 Mbps service are in the range of \$4,000 per month.

## Garfield County – Rifle & Glenwood Springs

### **Industry-Specific Meetings**

These meetings were organized as industry-specific events with one hour and fifteen minutes allotted to each. An open forum for the general public was the final event at the end of the day.

Business and industry specific meetings in Glenwood Springs and Rifle were attended by several local organizations, the Rifle Chamber of Commerce and Comcast. Attendees recognized the economic development imperative of broadband and discussed how the lack of broadband service impairs their efforts to recruit new businesses to the area. Another of the participants articulated the need for middle mile fiber and improved access, and the influence on transport costs. Additionally, the effect of inadequate broadband service on education and the long-term economic impact that it causes by creating an ill-prepared workforce.

During the education and libraries meeting, participants discussed the library network and cloud-based resources which are completely dependent upon quality broadband services. Regional provider, Cedar Networks has installed the library's internal network which then accesses resources through the Marmot Library Network. The Library pays Cedar Networks for

the phone service, and Marmot is paid for Internet service. The Library's Digital Services Manager, Jerry Morris handles any network issues, contract management and quality control for services deployment. Morris described the relationship as one of great benefit to the library, with Cedar Networks going so far as to provide a credit to the library in case of service failures or other down time.

## Garfield County – New Castle & Carbondale

### **Public Meetings**

These meetings were organized as an open forum for the general public.

Participants discussed the lack of residential service options in some of the rural areas near New Castle. Many currently use HughesNet satellite service as their Internet Service Provider. A common complaint is that there is no choice of providers, and in many areas HughesNet is the only service available. HughesNet's broadband service is considered to be unreliable and expensive, and described by attendees as being "better than dial up."

Another attendee who lives just outside of town uses CenturyLink as his personal provider and purchases a 1.5 Mbps plan at \$60-70.00/month that meets his needs "some of the time." Additionally, he works with the Colorado River Fire Rescue (CRFR.) which provides Fire, EMS, Hazmat and Rescue services for New Castle, Silt, Rifle and the surrounding areas with a total response area of 851 square miles. CRFR has numerous stations which are served by CenturyLink and Comcast. Although the organization is considering utilizing some of Cedar Networks' fiber optics, CRFR is concerned that portions of Cedar Networks' system consists of aerial lines, which could create reliability and redundancy issues.

The Carbondale Public Forum event was attended by numerous citizens, several local reporters, and by the Technical Services Director for Colorado Mountain College (CMC). Availability and reliability seemed to be the greatest concerns among attendees. Missouri Heights' residents complained that their HOA is "entirely underserved" and they are currently trying to find solutions independent of local government. The Missouri Heights Fire District was discussed as a potential catalyst for grant funding, with the possibility of the FCC providing support to connect outlying facilities.

The CMC Technical Services Director, Jim English, discussed the difficulties of getting cellular and data services to their rural Spring Valley Campus. CMC currently uses microwave technology, in parallel with a Metro Ethernet solution to complete their broadband connection. Further, they partner with CommNet to make a microwave connection for cellular service. Director Jim English explained that they intend to bring fiber to the campus, and when they do "that will be a game-changer," in terms of bandwidth quality and capacity.