

RURAL BROADBAND INSIGHTS FOR CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE



WITH PARTNER JONATHAN CHAMBERS

Co-ops Connect FYI

By Jonathan Chambers • Mar 29, 2024

Smart Brevity® count: 4 mins...1014 words

Milestones: 100% Access



Sometimes, it's good to take stock and celebrate milestones.

My favorite milestone to celebrate is the completion of a fiber project.

By completion, I mean 100% of the co-op members enjoy access to world-class fiber broadband service. When we meet with co-op management teams and boards of directors, we promise three things:

1. 100% of the members will have access to the fiber network for broadband,
2. The electric business will not subsidize the fiber business, and
3. We will build at a pace that matches the pressing need for broadband in rural America.

In 2016, our promises did not match the broadband experience of rural America. At the time, **it took a leap of faith to hire us.**

For that reason, I will forever be grateful to those who put their faith in us: Tim Johnson of Otsego Electric Cooperative, Sean Vanslyke of SEMO, Tim Davis of Pemiscot Dunklin Electric Cooperative, Gary Wood of Central Virginia Electric Cooperative, and Patrick Grace of Oklahoma Electric Cooperative.

I recall a phone call I had with Tim Davis seven years ago. He said, “Jonathan, I’m an old lineman. I don’t know anything about building or operating a broadband network. But I think our community needs it. If you tell me we can do this, I’m going to put my faith in you.”

When someone tells you they are putting their faith in you, it changes you. Or, it does me. I gave Tim my word, and there is nothing I wouldn’t have done to keep my word to him.

Today, those first five — Otsego, SEMO, PemDunk, OEC, and CVEC — all offer fiber broadband service to every one of their members.

Middle Georgia EMC



Next week, we will celebrate the completion of Middle Georgia EMC fiber network.

- Middle Georgia EMC's 1,300-mile network will reach 100% of the EMC's 4,800 members across seven counties in rural central Georgia. **That's 3.7 members per mile.**
- I am grateful to the CEO at the start, Randy Crenshaw, and the CEO at the finish, Randy Nichols, who championed and supported the project from concept to completion.

As Randy Nichols, President and CEO of Middle Georgia EMC, put it:

“Witnessing the success of our fiber-to-the-home initiative within our communities has been truly gratifying. The impact on members’ quality of life is immeasurable – from improved healthcare services facilitated by telemedicine to enhanced communication that connects families and friends across distances. This has been a catalyst for community development, and we have Conexon to thank for helping us get to this point.”

Conexon Milestones



Eight years ago this month, I agreed to join Randy at Conexon, which he started in 2015.

Together, we have achieved more milestones than either of us imagined when we began.

- The first year, it was just the two of us. Soon, we will hire our 1,000th employee.
- This year, we will assist our 100th electric cooperative to fund, design, construct, and/or operate a fiber broadband network.
- Randy's first fiber project was with a 30,000-member co-op; the co-ops we have assisted reach more than 3 million rural Americans with fiber broadband.
- Randy's first co-op invested \$75 million to build its fiber network; the co-ops we have assisted to date have invested more than \$4 billion dollars in their networks.
- Over a decade ago, Bob Hance at Midwest Energy Cooperative (now Midwest Energy & Communications) approached me about getting access to federal funds for broadband; since then, we have helped co-ops to win billions of dollars in grants and subsidies.

Co-op Milestones



We have *completed* more than 20 electric co-op fiber projects. This year will be a banner year. We expect to complete another 20 electric co-op fiber projects, many at a stunning pace:

- **Southern Rivers Energy in Georgia**, a 2,000-mile network passing more than 20,000 meters, was completed in 2 years.
- **Cumberland EMC in Tennessee**, a 6,000-mile network passing 100,000 meters, will have been completed in just 5 years.

Both are remarkable achievements. At each such milestone in the future, I plan to do a better job of congratulating the co-op management, board of directors and teams that help make these successes possible.

The Final Word



As we and our partners know, it hasn't been all peaches and cream.

The work has been hard; if it were easy, it would have been done before by the telephone and cable companies.

Our partners — the co-op managers and boards; the make-ready construction crews, the underground and overhead mainline fiber crews; the splicers, the drop crews and installers; the operations, member relations and finance teams; RUS, CoBank and CFC; the fiber and electronics manufacturers – all largely have been exemplary.

- I say largely because a few times it's been more pits than peaches.
- I'd like to think Conexon has been forthright, has lived up to our word, and has acknowledged and fixed our mistakes.

As every reader of this column knows, the electric co-op community has long been divided about its participation in broadband.

- I once thought most electric co-ops would choose to serve their members with broadband.
- I now think there will be a divide between co-ops in the future.
- In the 1930s and 1940s, unserved rural communities chose to invest in their own electric networks. Those communities were made better

off by that choice.

- To borrow from Randy Nichols of Middle Georgia EMC: The impact on members' quality of life was immeasurable.

The bottom line:

I am proud of what the electric co-op community has accomplished. And, I am proud, over these past eight years, **of what we have been privileged to build.**

There is one more large tranche of federal funding coming. As I wrote last week, if the FCC does the right thing and grants a limited amnesty to RDOF recipients, BEAD could well be a successful program for electric co-ops.

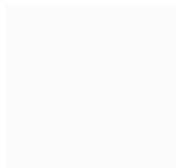
Either way, we intend to complete what we started, ***together.***

To those of you who celebrate, Happy Easter.

*Feel free to forward this **Co-ops Connect FYI** to colleagues who want to stay in the know on all things broadband! Subscribe to Conexon's weekly newsletter [here](#).*

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