

ConnectGRADD Goes Online:

Connecting Rural Communities Regionally and Globally

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In early 2006, the chief executive officials of two western Kentucky counties sat in their respective offices individually contemplating ambitious projects. Daviess County Judge/Executive Reid Haire and Webster County

Judge/Executive James Townsend both wanted to find a way to extend affordable Internet access to the rural residents in their jurisdictions. Leadership of the Green River Area Development District, based in Owensboro, had a suggestion: Why not explore the feasibility of a region-wide broadband Internet initiative?

Eighteen months later, the result is more ambitious than Haire or Townsend could have imagined. Seven counties have partnered to launch ConnectGRADD, Inc., a collaborative venture to offer affordable, high-speed Internet access across a vast rural region.

About the region

The Green River Area Development District (GRADD) is a regional planning agency serving the western Kentucky counties of Daviess, Hancock, Henderson, McLean, Ohio, Union and Webster. The GRADD region encompasses an area larger than the state of Delaware, but with just one quarter of the population (approx. 212,000).

Like most rural areas in America, opportunities for economic development in the district are limited. Communities within GRADD struggle to attract and retain industry because the infrastructure cannot compete with that of larger metropolitan areas. No federal interstate highways traverse the region, and many local governments expend the bulk of their annual revenues simply to maintain their water and sewer systems.

However, it has been said that the Internet is our era's great equalizer. The same technology that allows tribesmen in sub-Saharan Africa access to the most current theories of astrophysics also allows small, geographically isolated communities in the United States to compete for global industry. The same technology that allows many companies to locate



Technicians install antennae on existing towers throughout the GRADD region, which will bring high-speed wireless Internet service to residents of the predominantly rural region.

their facilities outside of major metropolises also provides educational and entrepreneurial opportunities for rural residents.

It is with this principle in mind that ConnectGRADD, Inc. was formed. Local officials in each of the GRADD counties recognized that this unique partnership would provide their citizens with opportunities that typically had been available only in larger cities. In addition to leveling the economic development playing field, ConnectGRADD would allow rural residents to have unprecedented opportunities for education, self-employment and entertainment.

Prior to the inception of ConnectGRADD, the majority of residents in GRADD's two largest cities, Owensboro (pop. 55,000) and Henderson (pop. 27,000), had affordable, high-speed Internet access through private providers. However, none of the other cities in the district have more than 4,000 residents. Rural households subscribing to DSL or cable Internet services paid on average more than \$60 per month. ConnectGRADD aimed to offer comparable service for under \$30 per month to a minimum of 93 percent of residents in the seven-county area by the end of 2007.

ConnectGRADD was greatly influenced by Kentucky's statewide technology initiative, ConnectKentucky.

ConnectKentucky was instituted by Governor Ernie Fletcher in 2004 to accelerate the growth of technology in support of community and economic development, improved health-care, enhanced education and more effective government. The initiative has four key goals: full statewide broadband coverage; dramatically increased use of computers and the Internet by all Kentuckians; a meaningful online presence for all Kentucky communities; and the formation of eCommunity leadership teams in all 120 counties, to bring local leaders together to plan technology growth strategies for every sector of the community. ConnectKentucky has become a model for the nation, receiving the U.S. Economic Development Administration's prestigious Excellence in Innovation Award in 2006.

Partnerships and challenges

ConnectGRADD's business partners – technology installation firm Digital Connections, Inc. (DCI) from Hendersonville, Tennessee, and Internet service provider Cinergy Communications Company (CCC) from Evansville, Indiana – have enthusiastically embraced the project's mission. Officials at both companies have pledged their desire not only to meet but to exceed the 93 percent minimum threshold of coverage. ConnectGRADD has become an incredible success story of public-private cooperation.

This summer, DCI technicians began installing wireless antennas on 28 existing towers across the region that will transmit the Internet signal. If installation and testing go as expected, the vast majority of GRADD's residents will be able to connect to the Internet by the end of 2007.

The ConnectGRADD project has not been without challenges. Like any major undertaking involving multiple jurisdictions, voices have not always spoken in unison. One early obstacle was educating the public on the benefits of wireless Internet service. A handful of rural residents objected to their county governments spending money on "invisible infrastructure." To them, taxpayer funds could be used more wisely for tangible, traditional improvements, e.g., asphalt for roads and water line extensions. Through a series of public meetings, elected officials were able to convince constituents of the desirability – and necessity – of broadband access to their community's viability.



Cooperative funding and communication

Cooperation between local leaders and state legislators also has been a key factor in ConnectGRADD's success. The senators and representatives of the GRADD area worked closely with the region's judge/executives to secure funding for the project. When local officials discovered that the price tag for ConnectGRADD would be an estimated \$2.3 million, they appealed to the Kentucky General Assembly for help. Legislators delivered with a \$1.3 million Local Government Economic Development Fund Coal Severance grant to ConnectGRADD, Inc. (GRADD lies within the Western Kentucky Coal Field region of the state; the Coal Severance program is an attempt to help coal-producing counties diversify their economies and offset the impact of the mining industry's decline.)

ConnectGRADD, Inc. also secured a \$1 million Kentucky Infrastructure Authority loan as the second major source of financing for the project. This low-interest loan will be repaid by the individual counties as the project goes online. Counties will be able to use grant funding, such as annual Area Development Fund dollars, to help pay off this loan.

The final funding component was a \$150,000 Delta Regional Authority (DRA) grant received through the Webster County Fiscal Court. DRA money is intended to assist the counties of the largely impoverished Mississippi River Valley in achieving economic parity with the rest of the nation.

The ConnectGRADD, Inc. partnership strives to promote public awareness about this groundbreaking project. In an effort to keep citizens informed of progress, a website (www.connectgradd.net) was developed to provide citizens with frequent updates of specific developments in their county. A toll-free telephone number (1-877-GRADD-411) also was established to allow customers to sign up for Internet service.

A reason for optimism

In addition to impacting residential subscribers, enhanced Internet availability will allow local governments to improve their efficiency. Seven county fiscal courts and 27 cities will be able to offer e-government services such as online registration and bill payment. Countless other agencies will benefit as well, from health care providers utilizing tele-health technologies to educational institutions expanding their long-distance course offerings.

We also hope ConnectGRADD will encourage rural entrepreneurship. Last year we created the Green River Entrepreneur Club to help local citizens start and grow small businesses. This group meets monthly to provide tips and networking opportunities to entrepreneurs in our seven-county area.

In an era of government territorialism and divisive political partisanship, collaborative ventures like ConnectGRADD are a welcome development. The innovative judge/executives of the GRADD region are proving that the commonwealth of Kentucky's motto is more than words: "United We Stand, Divided We Fall." * * *

For more information, visit www.connectgradd.net, or contact the author at jitenshah@gradd.com.



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