

Pole Attachments + Permitting – Moderator: David Soffer, WANRack

Panelists:

Brent Cunningham, Cunningham Communications

Tina Steele, Manager, Contract Programs, Evergy

Mark Scheibe, CEO, Heartland Electric Cooperative

Question: What are key strategies used to navigate hurdles in deploying broadband infrastructure

Answer: (Brent) We just need to watch what is happening and pay attention. Contractors, sub-contractors, use google earth to preempt issues and avoid them, etc. Get a process and build relationships.

Q: Main considerations when considering pole attach agreements?

A: (Tina) FCC rules and guidelines. Evergy has a tried-and-true standards for pole attachment. Makes sure our systems are safe and reliable. We serve the whole community. We have a lot of old contracts we try to renew and keep everything up to date.

Q: Are you seeing an increase in pole attachment requests?

A: (Tina) Absolutely, applications are up 200%. We have a small team that is very busy, so we have to work hard to keep up. We are looking at our process to find any pain points and we are adding additional resources. We rely on contractors to make things easier, faster, and more efficient.

Q: As an electrical co-op, what are some unique challenges for your company regarding pole attachments and broadband deployment?

A: (Mark) When you look at rural America the infrastructure has been there for years. Height and size of poles for example. When looking at contracts we have to pay attention to those and maybe suggest replacing those poles. But those replacements can be valuable for the community as a whole. We have worked very hard to ensure our pole attachment agreements are fair and balanced. We also don't have a large staff to maintain these contracts, so we have to get it done right the first time.

Q: What technical standards do you adhere to?

A: (Brent) We are trying to be responsible. We can't overuse the poles and they shut down. We have to be sustainable. What we have done is bolt extensions to reuse the same attachments to be efficient. Many other technical/engineering innovations to relieve stress and clutter on the poles. Tree-trimming is something we provide to ensure safety and support smaller communities who may not be able to do it themselves.

Q: As we continue into BEAD and seeing more applications, what are some challenges from an operations standpoint to manage that increase and ensure efficient deployment?

A: (Tina) We want to be thoughtful of everyone's scope. Trying to be a good steward internally

can be difficult. We do internal outreach to ensure all staff are on the same page. We often see these projects catch us off guard. We are trying to project expansion so we are prepared and can meet timelines. Pole transfers can be challenging from an external standpoint.

Q: In collaboration with providers, what are best practices for these partnerships?

A: (Mark) Collaboration with pole owners to know what they need is vital. The top priority is getting communities access to internet, so we need communication between companies to make sure we are meeting everyone's needs to serve the client.

Q: At times there is conflict in this space. How do you see the dynamics between providers and pole companies evolving with increasing demands for fiber?

A: (Brent) There have definitely been some horror stories about communications, but I think our communities are different in that we've built longstanding relationships focused on communication, trust, and service to the community. (Tina) I've been with Evergy for over 20 years, and this is the most challenging program I've worked on. Companies change names, leaders, and merge, but I don't think Evergy has done its best at building relationships. Our team is trying to fix that, build these relationships, and be responsive. (Mike) There will be a lot of contractors out there that may not be the most qualified to do the job, especially with the increase in demand. We have to make sure that we are hiring the most qualified applicants so we can avoid inefficiency and safety issues.

Q: In December, the FCC adopted a notice regarding pole attachments. What are your thoughts on the FCC approach? Are you satisfied, have things not been addressed?

A: (Brent) I'm not sure additional regulation is good, but I don't have any specific complaints at this moment. (Tina) One of the things with the new rules is an element of pole inspection records. So, we are trying to create that database on our website. Looking to be transparent on inspections. Pole replacement costs have been vague from the ruling, so we are looking to get clarification from that. It's about affordability for our customers. (Mike) Tina covered it all.

Q: Looking ahead, Kansas has a nice close-knit community and collaboration seems to be good, but what recommendations do you have for policymakers and what you want to see in the industry?

A: (Brent) Would like more communication from the pole providers. I think lawmakers should hear the good and bad and know what projects are going on, so they see all of our industry. (Tina) I agree. Events like this just talking through the process are very beneficial. Electric providers have a stake in it to, so I understand those concerns and it's what my team is working on internally to ensure we understand our role in this whole process. (Mike) More policy doesn't always make it easier. Having a streamlined process does make sense and makes our jobs more efficient, fair, and balanced. Making sure communication stays prevalent is key.

Q: With new buildouts going and more providers looking to get on attachments, do co-ops have processes where you'll have multiple people submitting applications, do you have a pecking order for getting them on?

A: (Mike) We haven't had that issue in our area, so it is usually first come first serve. If multiple providers going on, we look at fiber count and assets so we can properly assign costs if others are getting on. There's a cost calculation on our end, we want to work with someone who is ready to go.