Dominion Energy-Prince George Electric Cooperative Broadband Case Study—'A Unique Bond'

For years, industry executives in Surry County, Virginia, struggled to find ways to bring reliable, high-speed internet to home and businesses within its borders. A largely rural area along the James River in the southeast quadrant of the Commonwealth, Surry County, with its population of approximately 7,000 people—roughly 24 people per square mile, according to Wikipedia—was not an attractive location for private telecommunications companies to provide competitive internet service.

Into this void stepped RURALBAND, a wholly owned subsidiary of Prince George Electric Cooperative (PGEC). Created in 2016, RURALBAND began offering high-speed internet service to customers along PGEC's service territory, which covered areas southeast of Richmond and west of the highly populated Hampton Roads, Norfolk areas.

But while RURALBAND was able to provide service to surrounding counties, Surry County proved to be a particularly difficult area to reach. According to Lane Chambers, Engineering Projects Manager at PGEC, this is because the County had very little broadband availability to its citizens. In addition, while partnerships with key critical-infrastructure providers helped RURALBAND bring broadband to other areas, Surry County was served by two utilities—PGEC and Dominion Energy. This could've been a big challenge to ensuring the entire county was served, as PGEC at that point in time had few electric facilities deployed on other utilities' infrastructure, Mr. Chambers said in a May 20 UTC webinar.

Connecting Surry County "had the potential of being the most difficult and challenging to date," he said.

All of this changed when Mr. Chambers said he received a call from Dominion Energy. Dominion Energy, Mr. Chambers said, was planning on deploying a fiber-optic network across its service territory, including Surry County. The company would have access to dark fiber available on its network that could be made available. And this was more than just a leasing arrangement, he said.

"It only took a couple of conversations of sitting down with Dominion's team to understand their idea of a partnership was much more than just leasing dark fiber capacity to serve their service territory," Mr. Chambers said. "Dominion Energy was dedicated to this partnership and making this partnership one that would flow very smoothly toward the common goal of serving those who had been left behind for quite some time."

PROJECT DETAILS

As part of its effort to modernize and improve its infrastructure, Dominion Energy is installing fiber in rural areas as it moves forward with efforts to transform Virginia's energy grid. By utilizing fiber capacity for operational needs and broadband access, Dominion Energy can reduce broadband deployment costs for internet service providers.

In this case, Dominion Energy has agreed to serve as the "middle mile" provider by allowing RURALBAND to lease fiber and provide last-mile Fiber-To-The-Home service. The utilities have completed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to detail how the parties would work together on the project, which will be filed with the State Corporation Commission (SCC) later this year for regulatory approval.

Under the MOU, Dominion will build out fiber along 42 miles of its distribution system in the County. While some of the specifics are still being determined, Dominion and PGEC are working closely to ensure the end result aligns with what both parties want—a more modern grid and high-speed internet connectivity.

"We're meeting a lot of different needs," said Nathan Frost, Dominion Energy's Director of New Technology and Energy Conservation on the UTC webinar. From PGEC's perspective, "we're able to enable broadband deployment for the citizens of Surry County, but also it's a win-win in that it can give us better visibility within our operations in that area."

According to both utilities, this partnership marks the first time an investor-owned utility like Dominion Energy has joined with a cooperative to expand broadband access in the Commonwealth.

"I have to admit, I found this to be potentially one of the most unique bonds that we could forge to date," said Mr. Chambers.

The entire webinar can be found here: https://youtu.be/2IoyrVSmroM