



Clare County First in State to Join Innovative Broadband Expansion Effort

Leaders enlist in Connect Michigan's Connected program to bridge technology gap, boost economy, and quality of life

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Clare County, MI - Clare County leaders Tuesday became the first in the state to enroll their community in an innovative program that seeks to boost the local economy and quality of life for residents through increased access, adoption, and use of broadband.

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-Steven Kingsbury
City of Clare

Staff from Connect Michigan, the statewide nonprofit promoting broadband expansion, led 16 Clare County leaders through the steps of the new “Connected” community certification program that offers a comprehensive and localized way for communities to bridge the digital divide impacting many communities.

While broadband access at basic speeds is 97 percent (excluding mobile access) across Michigan, that figure plunges to 75 percent for Clare County’s 31,000 residents.

Clare County’s rolling hillsides, heavy foliage, and low-density housing have hampered high-speed Internet development – a factor that research has shown to also be a barrier to economic development.

“We have observed since the beginning of our efforts that the most significant challenge facing the deployment of broadband technology in Clare County is what attracts many people in making their choice to live here - beautiful, rural communities with vast amounts of open and wooded space,” said Steven Kingsbury, former elected city commissioner, treasurer, finance director, and director of information technology for the City of Clare.

This digital gap led local officials to begin working on fixed wireless broadband expansion plans and eventually start working with Connect Michigan for assessments of local adoption and use - all with positive results.

“Partnering with the Connected Nation and Connect Michigan initiatives provides our local group access to additional resources to further our project,” Kingsbury said. Connected Nation is Connect Michigan’s parent organization.

The Clare County Broadband Network Group’s efforts have already successfully connected several governmental buildings during the last two years.

“We have also in this timeframe connected all four townships on the east side of the county through the deployment of 150-foot or taller wireless communication towers and at the present time we are continuing to work with several other townships to connect them through the wireless network,” Kingsbury said.

Another major step forward in closing the digital divide came when officials decided to enroll in the Connected community certification program.

“From the beginning of our project we recognized that broadband availability is important in promoting our area to potential home and/or cottage owners as well as commercial and industrial developments. We also fully appreciate how important deployed availability of this technology is in leveling the educational opportunities for the school aged children and young adults living throughout the county,” Kingsbury said.

“The Clare County Broadband Network Group has been following the progress of the Connect Michigan program since mid-summer and had requested that once Connect Michigan launches its Connected program that they be one of the first communities that I visit and present them an opportunity to become a certified Connected broadband community,” said Tom Stephenson, Connect Michigan regional planning consultant.

The initial meeting was held in Harrison and was attended by community leaders including county commissioners, several township supervisors, and municipal officials who decided to immediately move forward with the certification process.

“For me, the room was full of heroes, a proud group of hard working people that have fallen onto hard times, yet are determined to lift themselves and the citizens they serve out of dismal times and toward a better life,” Stephenson said.

The Connected certification program entails building a comprehensive action plan for developing a technology-ready community by reviewing the technology landscape, developing regional partnerships, establishing local teams, and conducting thorough community assessments.

“Our initial meetings with representatives from the Connected program have been very positive,” Kingsbury said. “We have accomplished a great number of our initial goals and are anxious to continue our momentum in connecting local governmental entities into our governmental network and also in expanding broadband access to the unserved and underserved residents of our county. We are also very interested in sharing with other communities how a grassroots, community focused and centered initiative can get broadband connectivity into rural Michigan.”

“I commend Clare County officials and Connect Michigan for working together to help bring broadband to more rural Michigan residents,” said Sen. Darwin Booher, R-Ewart. “In an ever increasingly digital and online world, access to new technologies, like broadband, are vital to keeping Michigan workers competitive for jobs and preparing our students for success.”

“I am excited to see this initiative start right here in Clare,” District 97 Representative Joel Johnson said. “The need for broadband access in our rural areas is a challenge, and success here will lead to more deployment throughout Michigan.”

“The Clare group realizes that making broadband available to all its citizens was only part of the solution, and they still needed to deal with adoption and usage issues,” Stephenson said. “The Clare group was well organized and had a broadband plan for their county; they knew that Connect Michigan along with its regional partners could help provide the necessary resources to address those adoption and use issues and allow them to fulfill their dream. Their dream is to have affordable broadband available to all of its citizens and to have a sign on every road entering Clare County say, ‘Welcome to Clare County, a Certified Connected Community.’ If you listen to their story, hear their passion and see the determination on their faces, you know that dream will someday come true.”

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About Connect Michigan: As the designated entity for broadband mapping and planning in the state of Michigan, Connect Michigan is a public-private partnership between the Michigan Public Service Commission and Connected Nation to unite local governments, businesses, and citizens in the goal of increasing broadband service in the state’s underserved areas. For more information about what Connect Michigan is doing to accelerate technology in Michigan’s communities, visit www.connectmi.org.

About the Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC): The MPSC is a state agency within the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs. For more information about the MPSC visit <http://www.michigan.gov/mpsc>.

About Connected Nation: Connected Nation is a leading technology organization committed to bringing affordable high-speed Internet and broadband-enabled resources to all Americans. Connected Nation effectively raises the awareness of the value of broadband and related technologies by developing coalitions of influencers and enablers for improving technology access, adoption, and use. Connected Nation works with consumers, community leaders, states, technology providers and foundations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to develop and implement technology expansion programs with core competencies centered on a mission to improve digital inclusion for people and places previously underserved or overlooked. www.connectednation.org.

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