

## OVERCOMING BROADBAND HURDLES

### *City of* WEST PLAINS



With job losses mounting and its economic and technological future at stake, the city of West Plains was at a crossroads in 2015. The sentiment in the local business community was that affordable and reliable high-speed internet was lacking — a major hurdle to economic growth in West Plains and South Central Missouri.

Determined to no longer rely on private internet service providers (ISPs) to shape its economic future, the City, with the support of local business and community leaders, has since invested the time and money necessary to create its own ISP. The result? Nearly two years later, the City has generated buzz through the state of Missouri for its aggressive approach toward solving its own broadband issue, and is now able to offer affordable and reliable dedicated high-speed fiber internet to all its businesses in West Plains.

“Being able to offer fast and affordable internet is a huge asset for West Plains, particularly when trying to attract businesses and investors to the area,” said West Plains City Administrator Tom Stehn. “As a municipality, it’s a huge luxury to know that we can keep internet costs down and

reliability high for our existing businesses. For new businesses coming in, the City can now offer an incentive of fast and secure fiber connections at prices comparable, or in some cases lower, than in the big cities. It levels the playing field, and possibly might even tilt it in our favor.”

### **A Necessity For Smaller Communities**

As the Executive Director for the Ozarks Small Business Incubator (OzSBI) in West Plains and a member of Missouri Governor Eric Greitens’ Innovation Task Force, Heather Fisher is in a unique position to understand the importance of high-speed internet at the local and state levels. Fisher and the OzSBI staff provide support for burgeoning entrepreneurs and business owners at all stages in their business development, and among the keys for profitability and sustainability in today’s business climate is affordable and reliable internet.

“It really is imperative for most businesses, including our OzSBI clients, many of whom deal with medical data,

Medicare billing and time-sensitive information,” explained Fisher. “Without reliable internet they are not able to function. We have witnessed first-hand the challenges facing rural businesses.”

Fisher echoed the sentiment that a locally-provided internet solution is a must for communities such as West Plains that prompted OzSBI to become one of the City’s earliest fiber customers in early 2016. Since that partnership, OzSBI is now more capable of meeting the needs of its existing clients and those of the laptop professionals needing reliable internet service in the OzSBI building. The end result is enhanced services at OzSBI and an expansion of its client base.

OzSBI’s passion is not only providing a community of support for entrepreneurs and existing businesses, but also improving the economy of the Ozarks by creating good jobs, new products and services, and pursuing innovation. High-speed internet is a crucial part of that formula, said Fisher.

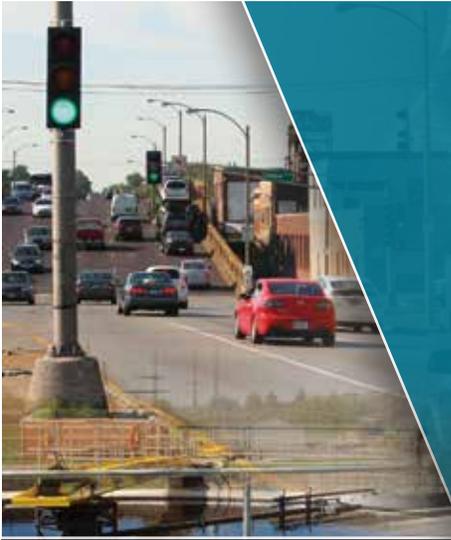
“Broadband is no longer a luxury,” said Fisher. “It is basic infrastructure that is expected and required in today’s business world. If we want to grow tech companies in low-cost, affordable communities like West Plains, we need broadband connectivity. Without it our growth is hindered.”

### Community-Wide Broadband Committee

West Plains first began researching solutions for its broadband dilemma in September 2015, with a community-formed Broadband Study Group. The 22-person group consisted of local business and civic leaders who came together with one purpose: To research options that would provide West Plains’ consumers with improved reliability and affordability for internet access.

To accomplish this, the study group had three goals: 1) determine the technical needs, installation requirements, economic benefit and financial considerations of offering municipal broadband; 2) research other municipalities that have successfully and unsuccessfully implemented broadband services in their communities; and 3) provide a list of viable broadband options to the West Plains City Council.

Satisfied with their research, and with the city of West Plains already committed to establishing its own fiber network, the group’s final recommendation was for the City to take the next step in their technological evolution: Provide high-speed internet to all residential and commercial customers in West Plains. This recommendation, the group felt, was the best option for superior connectivity in West Plains, improving its economic development prospects and adding a quality-of-life amenity for its citizens.



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Crews from the city of West Plains electric department are shown stringing fiber optic cable.



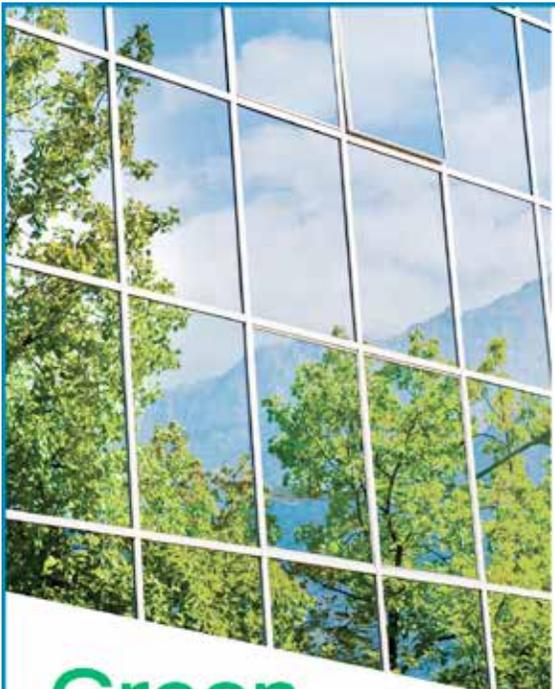
**Tovia Auala (left) and Justyn Biggers of the city of West Plains electric department work on splicing fiber optic cable.**

## Fiber Ring Around The City

The first step for the City was successful construction of its fiber “ring” around West Plains. This ring provides the backbone that allows West Plains to offer city-owned and run dedicated internet access (DIA) service to its businesses. DIA service can best be described as a specific amount of bandwidth that has been carved out and dedicated for use. Speeds are guaranteed and do not vary, and DIA service performs consistently on a daily basis.

“It’s like having your own personal lane on the information superhighway as opposed to sharing the same traffic lanes with everyone else,” explained Stehn.

The project is not without its challenges. To get the ring completed, the City used existing staff from crews already stretched thin from the electric department, and nearly 21 miles of fiber were strung in a 12-month period.





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With the understanding that fiber is the superior method of choice for the deployment of dedicated internet access, the city of West Plains can now offer dedicated service in hopes that existing and future businesses benefit from not having to pay higher prices for inferior bandwidth. It also established monthly rates for dedicated service that are very reasonable.

For major users such as OzSBI, the cost savings and improved productivity can be substantial.

To meet the needs of the business class and residential users, however, the city of West Plains is now looking to develop an internet solution that will provide the reliability and affordability necessary for those users. This fall, the City will implement a pilot project in a prominent retail district that the City will use to test a Gigabit Passive Optical Network (GPON) service. This point-to-multipoint access network

// We are very proud of what we have already accomplished, but we think the best is yet to come. //

~ West Plains City  
Administrator Tom Stehn

uses passive splitters in the fiber distribution network, enabling one single-feeding fiber from the provider to serve multiple homes and small businesses.

Information gathered from this pilot project, including the effectiveness of the service, will help steer the direction and scope of the fiber deployment in the immediate future.

## Leading The Way

Across the state of Missouri and the Midwest, West Plains has helped lead the way for communities seeking to fight legislation governing municipal broadband that the City feels puts smaller communities at a disadvantage with bigger cities when competing for business and industry.

National lawmakers have also taken notice. Ajit Pai, chairman of the United States Federal Communications Commission, recently held a town hall meeting in West Plains to discuss the City's broadband efforts and the challenges faced by smaller, rural communities. Chairman Pai, who was joined by local community leaders and heard firsthand accounts of the need for high-speed internet in rural cities like West Plains, likened the importance of broadband infrastructure nationally to the construction of roads and



(top) Crew member Donnie McClellan of the city of West Plains electric department is shown stringing fiber optic cable. (lower) To meet the needs of the business class and residential users, West Plains is working to develop an internet solution to provide the reliability and affordability necessary.

bridges. Building that broadband infrastructure, said Pai, is a priority to the current presidential administration.

Stehn, who credits a supportive City Council, local business community, and the diligence of the city staff for its early broadband accomplishments, said West Plains has now positioned itself to compete nationally, and even globally, in the high-stakes economic development game. In fact, with its own infrastructure in place, the city of West Plains can now offer up to 1 GB of dedicated service for any commercial entity in need of high-speed internet, making it one of the few "one-gig capable" cities in Missouri that does not rely solely on private ISPs.

As a City that proudly touts its strapline "Make It Happen Here," West Plains is no stranger to making its own luck. "We are very proud of what we have already accomplished," said Stehn. "But we think the best is yet to come." 🍃

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