



Muni Wireless Is Dead. Here Comes a New Way to Connect

By Michael Fitzgerald
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U.S. cities that once trumpeted their free public WiFi plans are muting their fanfare, as project after project stumbles. Now nonprofits have a plan to succeed where city governments have failed.

Two such examples launched this week, with at least \$61 million in combined funding.

"There was a lot of breathlessness about municipal wireless. People thought it was going to be a silver bullet to bring ubiquitous access and affordable broadband in the United States. They were wrong," said Alec Ross, executive vice president of [One Economy](#), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. "In the post-municipal WiFi world, we need to focus on community broadband."

One Economy announced earlier this week that it is launching a two-year program to bring internet access to 500,000 low-income Americans in more than 50 communities, backed in part by \$36 million from AT&T and its foundation. Then on Thursday, the [John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#) said it will put up \$15 million over five years to create the nonprofit Knight Center of Digital Excellence in Akron, Ohio. Knight has also set up a \$10 million Digital Opportunity Fund, which it will use to seed access projects for 26 communities that raise matching funds.

The two nonprofits developed their plans independently, but each expects to use a combination of wireless and wired technologies to create access.

Both nonprofits are starting their projects in the wake of a series of [high-profile stumbles](#) for wireless access projects in cities like [Boston](#), Chicago, St. Louis and San Francisco.

Many of these failures stem from a lack of clear models on how to develop and sustain such networks, says Craig J. Settles, who runs successful.com, a business-strategy firm with a focus on municipal wireless. "You had the public good (of municipal wireless) built on a very shaky financial model," he said.

One Economy will work with private partners to deploy broadband services. It will also develop community service projects involving more than 5,000 teenagers. Finally, in the belief that once low-income people go online they need more content that is tailored to

them, One Economy has started a content project, chaired jointly by Senators Barack Obama and John McCain and spearheaded by the actor Robert Townsend.

For its part, the Knight Center will have a dozen consultants specializing in working with communities to develop sustainable internet-access plans. It will also create a publicly available clearinghouse of examples from successful approaches. One such example is how [OneCommunity](#), a Cleveland-based nonprofit, has combined public and private institutions to bring access to communities across northeastern Ohio. Scot M. Rourke, president and CEO of OneCommunity, will head the new Knight Center.

"The goal is to collapse the time it takes for (communities) to educate themselves" on how to create -- and sustain -- public high-speed internet access, Rourke said.

He noted that successful public access projects have not relied on a single technology or approach. He also said the key to keeping these networks going is to bring in partners from both government and industry, which expands the potential range of funding, and can help create ongoing revenues for access networks.

Rourke said the new center will follow the same model of assessing community needs and revenue sources in all of its projects. "We're planning for the adoption and usage on the front end. It's the opposite of 'build it and they will come.'"