Le Sueur County Broadband Community Vision and Project Development Summary

Background and process:

In early 2020, Le Sueur County was selected as one of five new Blandin Broadband Communities working in partnership with the Foundation to expand broadband access and to increase technology adoption. Each community will receive up to $75,000 to allocate to technology projects using the Intelligent Community approach as the guiding framework.

Blandin Foundation has worked with over 40 communities – cities, counties, tribal governments, school districts and regional entities on this program over the past decade.

This report documents the discussion and decisions made by the Le Sueur County community through their Blandin Broadband Community Vision and Project Development process, including the Vision and Brainstorm meetings and an online voting process. The process occurred June 11 through June 26 via online Zoom meetings with voting via Survey Monkey. Approximately 80 people participated, representing key sectors of the community, including business, education, health care, government and residents.

Thank you to the Steering Team that helped to design, plan and implement this process which needed to be moved online due to COVID – 19 health protocols. The Steering Team managed the invitation process and encouraged participation. Their work will continue on to turn project ideas into actual projects with project leaders, teams, goals, strategies and budget.

Prior to COVID-19, Blandin Foundation used a three-hour Vision Meeting to:
- review the Intelligent Community approach
- highlight and discuss assets and gaps for each of the six elements
- create a set of desired outcomes
- brainstorm project ideas, and
- prioritize project ideas through voting and volunteering.

The new process is executed over a two to three-week process:
- Online survey focusing on each of the Intelligent Community elements
- Vision Meeting with discussion of assets and gaps and development of desired outcomes
- Brainstorm Meeting to generate project ideas
- Online community voting to prioritize projects
- Online process to recruit project volunteers
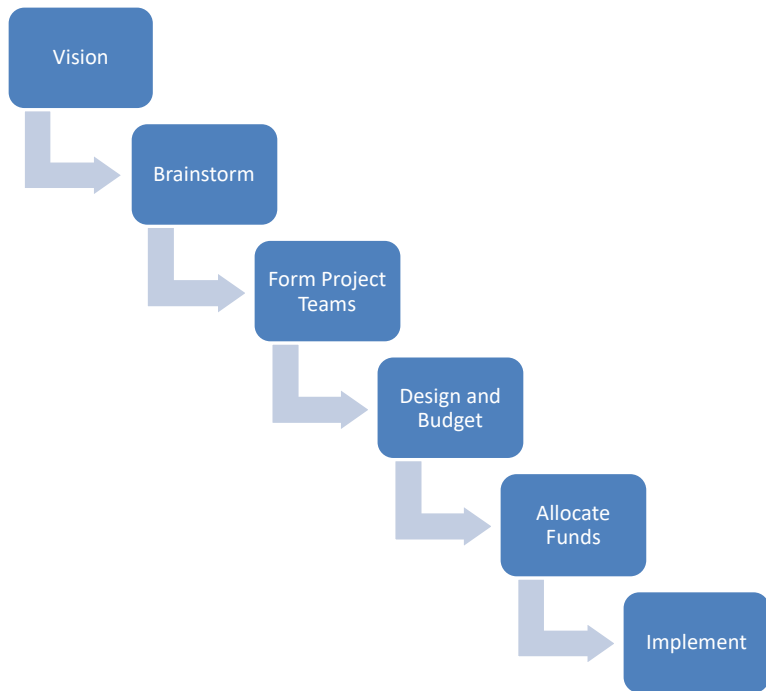
The Vision Meeting occurred June 11 via Zoom with 40 attendees. The Brainstorm Meeting was held June 17 with 35 participants. The voting was open June 22-26; 79 community members took part in that process.

The next steps will be for the project teams to formalize project proposals for consideration by the Steering Team which will prioritize projects and allocate Blandin Foundation grant funds.

This report summarizes this process to date.

Vision Meeting

The purpose of the Vision Meeting is to familiarize community members with the Blandin Broadband Community program, list and discuss community assets and gaps regarding the six Intelligent Community elements (www.intelligentcommunity.org) and to develop a consensus on the community's desired outcomes from their participation in the Blandin process.

In essence, the Intelligent Community method (www.intelligentcomunity.org) can be summarized as follows: on a base of broadband infrastructure and services, a community can work to support the creation, attraction and support of a knowledge workforce; spur the adoption of innovation throughout the community; adopt sustainability practices and address digital inclusion. With these activities, a community can create both internal and external marketing and advocacy messages to attract people and investment.

Blandin Foundation consultant Bill Coleman teamed with local leaders to describe the Intelligent Community framework to all participants. Coleman provided general background information and local leaders provided their more knowledgeable local perspective. Selected highlights from the pre-registration community survey were included in the presentation. Complete responses to the open-ended survey questions can be found online here: https://blandinfoundation.org/content/uploads/Le-Sueur-County-BBC-Registration-Survey-Qs-1-5-061020.pdf

All of this information was used as a community conversation starter at the Vision Meeting and will be used as a tool to measure progress over the two-year Broadband Community program.

Following the ICF presentation, attendees were placed in Zoom breakout rooms to delve more deeply into their Intelligent Community element. Attendees brought their own personal experience and nuanced knowledge to the discussion. Each of the groups were charged with and accomplished the following tasks for their assigned Intelligent Community element:

a) Build on the list of Assets and Gaps/Barriers presented by the community presenters
b) Create a list of Desired Outcomes

The following summary includes information from community presenters, the community survey and the community discussion of the Vision meeting.

Broadband

This map illustrates the availability of broadband within Le Sueur County. Areas in red are considered unserved (broadband services of less than 25 Mb/3 Mb). Areas in purple are considered under-served (services between 25 Mb/3 Mb and 100 Mb/20 Mb). Areas in green are considered served (services in excess of 100 Mb/20 Mb). Unserved areas area considered a priority for the Minnesota Border to Border Broadband Grant program.

A team of county and community leaders have been working on broadband improvements over the past two years. Recently, the county partnered with BevComm on a successful broadband grant from the State of Minnesota with another grant application in preparation for a fall application cycle. The county has an ongoing community broadband survey in place. Take the survey at: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RTMPJQZ.
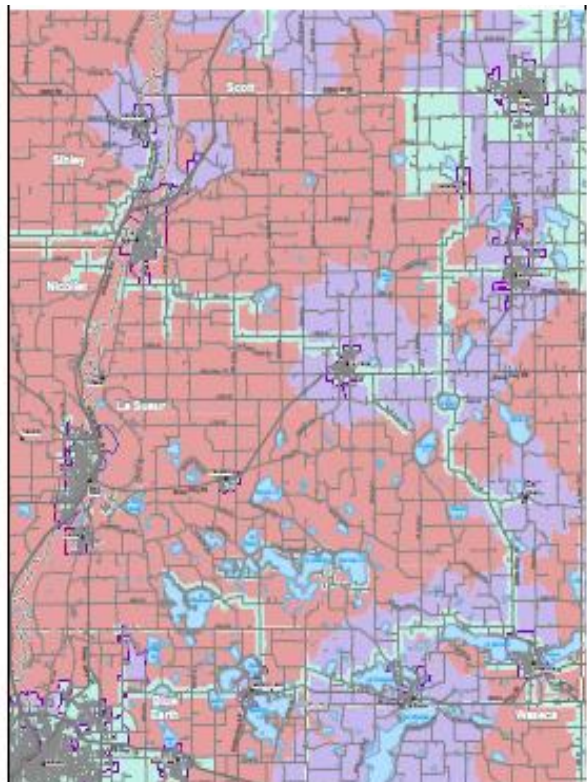
The following perspectives were harvested from the pre-registration survey for the Vision meeting. Full results from that survey can be found here.

- Education equity concerns for both young and adult learners
- We pay a lot; our Internet is slow and unreliable so I can't work from home or attend online church
- Our Internet is good; we can both work from home as a result
- COVID 19 has shown that we need better Internet
- Cellular data works, but is expensive with the data caps
- Weather can affect our wireless service
- Farmers with limited access cannot attend online training

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Enough densely populated areas to incentivize internet providers to provide quality service.	Enough non densely populated areas to not incentivize the providers. Requires federal, state, township $ to inspire them.
Providers willing to work with us. BevComm and Jaguar and maybe others.	Providers who don't want to work in some of our areas.
Satellite in some areas where nothing else works. HughesNet and ViaComm	Extreme Cost of satellite providers.
County is willing to help us. Some townships, as well.	Reliability. Weather affects wireless carriers.
	Data Caps. Cost.
	Broadband and Cellular costs and reliability issues.
	Geographic issues. High elevations and low valleys.
	Wireless network depends on network of wiling customers.

Participants were asked "If we are truly successful in this initiative over the next 18 months, what will be different?" "What are we trying to accomplish?"

Desired Outcomes
More speed. More affordability. More reliability
For everyone.
Safe and secure alternative options when some places aren't available. Libraries, etc.
Better customer service.
Better broadband, as well as cellular service.
Timeliness of improvements. ASAP.
Sustainability. Future improvements. Keeping pace with technology gains in the future.

Knowledge Workforce

Le Sueur County has excellent access to colleges in St. Peter, Mankato and the Twin Cities.

Manufacturing and agricultural jobs are predominant.

The information below is taken from the community survey.

- Schools need to be good enough to attract families of skilled workers
- We have great trades schools that help our local manufacturers
- Lack of broadband hinders workforce development and telework opportunities
- TCU has strong school to work programs
- Low pay hinders ability to attract skilled workers
- Location between TC and Mankato a plus

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Great Schools/Community Ed Programs	Broadband not up to standards, unable to attract workforce that expects this service
Hospitals in our Community	"Blue Collar" education and culture
Location, access to regional hubs	Affordable Housing
Real Estate value and access	Limited Communication via Government/Radio/Newspapers
Work Ethic, Ag based society	Long term planning for business development within the county, is this limited by lack of a fiber ring
Natural Resources, (lakes, rich farmland),	How does the community attract and retain a knowledge workforce?
Community assets, parks boards, nature center, lake Washington area	Support/resources for extracurricular events (Softball, youth programs, adult education, community events)
Libraries and strong library support	Knowledge of job opportunities in the County

If we are truly successful in this initiative over the next 18 months, what will we have accomplished in Knowledge Workforce?

Desired Outcomes
Coordinated county effort to attract workforce, connecting them to the assets that the county has
Access to education for Agri-business (Farmers) from their equipment, home, (training when they need it). Access to farm data on a real-time basis.

Innovation

There are innovative companies across a number of industries in Le Sueur County.

- WINCO & CAMBRIA
- Candies, Cakes & Coffees
- Banks – On-Line Presence
- MVEC – Smart-Grid Updates
- GIS Information & Surveying in Montgomery
- Winery & CSA: Next Chap, Monty Brewery & Chankaska Creek, Vintage Escape, Cedar Crate Farm, Eve's Orchard, My Minnesota Farmer, Montgomery Orchard
- GENEX & Area Co-ops for GIS-Sat Guided Field Mapping & efficiencies

These comments are reflective of the input from the community survey:

- Broadband is necessary to support innovation
- Le Sueur Co will need to show its adaptability to a changing work environment
- We need better support of education and health care
- County web site and GIS much improved
- Need to work together across communities
- No one has reached out to help our small high-tech company
- Communities/county not welcoming of innovation
- Doing poorly on innovation

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Great place to raise a family	Monitoring management
Many opportunities and activities	Targeted applications and resources
Have everything we really need consumer wise.	Need to be able to download security patches
Solid companies that are doing great things and changing their processes	Do not hear about the great things that are being done
Great agronomic base	Poor connectivity
Diversity and innovations in ag operations	Access to internet on the farm
Strong church community, food shelves, thrift stores, outreach, schools, Community Ed Programs	Getting messages across those "silos"
	Resources to help people understand how important it is to protect data/information - security!
	Housing for low income
	Knowledge of technology

If we are very successful on **Innovation**, in the next 18 months, we will achieve or make significant progress on the following desired outcomes:

Desired Outcomes
Resources for bandwidth & Security
Access to internet **everywhere**; especially in areas with poor connectivity
Reserving plots, watching training, advertising--- Community garden or small community farm that could potentially feed into a school store
Resources to help improve business productivity; how to build Facebook page, market product, communications, make a logo, etc. How do we create that hub in the county to help foster the innovation
Service corp of Retired Executives to come in to help with educating people
Innovation Hubs/Innovative Workspace- Ag-Tech-Business Skills-Marketing-Brainstorming & Shared experiences. Brick and mortar locations in each community where these. Like Studio 118 in Monty. Co-Working spaces, SCORE Workshops, Conference Areas.
Meeting spaces where people could congregate and have someone there to facilitate and/or educate people; shared work spaces; training spaces
1 Million Cups - innovation https://www.1millioncups.com/
Hotel space, transportation, Uber, Lyft, sharing economy!! (tiller, farm equipment, clothing)
Calendar that everyone can see events happening for the county - 1 place to go for resource information

Digital Equity

Local Presentation:

- Technology can be a powerful tool to create equity in schools
- Learning can happen anywhere any time
- Need to create a learning environment that is personalized and meets the learning needs of ALL students.
- Individual learning plans can be implemented for students
- Educational leaders and Staff can collect and utilize data to make more informed decisions for instructional practices and student learning.
- Lack of access can create and enhance inequities that have life-long impact.

Community Survey Results:

- Many people do not have devices or connectivity due to lack of income
- Lack of connection promotes the social, emotional and equity concerns that we are fighting to decrease.
- The pandemic highlights this problem
- Our confirmation students struggle with Internet connectivity
- Less fortunate people will fall further behind
- As a teacher, I see students falling behind
- We should not assume that everyone has the technology that they need.

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Free public WiFi access – need to get the information to the county residents	Sometimes even when you have the access, you don't have the technology skills. So, access includes education on the technology being used (hardware and software)
	Sometimes technology providers themselves such as Facebook make changes that users don't really understand how to implement.
	Sometimes signal coverage works in one part of the home, but not another. It may be that improved technical knowledge would help the end user solve the problem of how to get coverage throughout their home
There is a wonderful Geographic Information System in the county Susan Rynda had asked for a map that shows that information – where to access information	Without everybody having access to internet, key decision-making stakeholders aren't available in a timely manner. This slows processes and approvals.
Everbridge system pushes out public information.	Bandwidth limits

	Not everyone knows where public WiFi access points are
	Perhaps we need some type of a technology hotline for the county to help people to work through technology issues

If we are very successful on Digital Equity in the next 18 months, we will achieve or make significant progress on the following desired outcomes:

Desired Outcomes
Get the Public Wifi Access map published • Establish further public access sites based on a metric to be set. For example "an internet access spot every __ square miles"
Identify partners to drive education and access into the community • Example: Chamber of Commerce
Establish a county Facebook page Or, perhaps create a county website and turn it into an app
See if there are any counties with similar challenges to Le Sueur that have implemented effective solutions (sort of a search for a "best in class" county or two.

Advocacy

Local Presentation

- Broadband group is strong advocate
- Community survey(s) used for two-way communication to and from community

Community Survey

- Lack of broadband access detracts from our ability to attract people
- A more united, countywide approach to marketing would be beneficial
- I don't know what our marketing message is; I have never seen it
- "A county working to make connections for all"
- Should focus on improving existing business and lifestyle and not worry about attraction efforts
- Great location, beautiful area

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Colleges nearby.	Not all residents have local TV.
Le Sueur County News/Montgomery Messenger/Lake Region Life	Le Sueur County News - Not present to communicate the benefits of broadband
Le Sueur County Elected Officials Group	Do not have active participation by County Commissioners and outward communications to citizens by all levels of government. County, Townships and Cities.
KCHK Radio - Promotions Advertising	A different focus by local chamber of commerce offices.
Facebook Pages, Twitter Accounts, Blogs, Online Resident Groups	
Le Sueur County Broadband Facebook Group	
MN State University - Small Business Development Center	
Community Development Staff Person	

If we are very successful on Advocacy in the next 18 months, we will achieve or make significant progress on the following desired outcomes:

Desired Outcomes
Better Communications - Regular communication to the City Boards, County Boards, Township Boards
Elected officials group - Remain as a standing agenda item. Jean Keogh (Participant)
Emergency Management - How do they communicate with the citizens.
Telecommunications in Healthcare.
Consider having a Broadband Facebook group.
Fire district meetings? Attend these to seek the input from a larger demographic.
Write Grants to establish access to each rural home for sure.

Brainstorm Meeting Summary

Le Sueur County stakeholders met on June 17 to create a list of prospective projects that would lead to the desired outcomes established during the Vision meeting. Approximately 35 people attended this meeting. The participants were separated into discussion groups and spent about 30 minutes discussing project ideas. When this task was accomplished, the participants reconvened as a single group to list project ideas. Once all project ideas were captured, the project voting procedure was explained.

A small work group reviewed the project ideas and engaged to combine and clarify project ideas which were then imported into an online survey tool. The web link was promoted to attendees and more generally across the community for voting. Each participant had one dollar to allocate among their favorite projects so as to indicate their support. Voters also were able to volunteer for one or more projects thus creating immediate project teams.

The project ideas, voting summary and project teams are shown below.

Project	Total Points	Team Members
1. Create special funding programs to spur last mile connectivity in unique circumstances: rural neighborhoods, fixed wireless and cellphone boosters and business locations – Broadband	2246	Jeremy Reintjes Richard Peterson Brian Nordstrom Eric J Tuck Carl Menk Anne Obernolte Gregory Hagg William Paige-Evans Janet Nordstrom
7. Work to make broadband more affordable - Broadband	988	Gregory Hagg Janet Nordstrom William Paige-Evans Dottie May Monica Muchow
9. Start and/or expand wi-fi hotspot lending program at libraries - Digital equity	487	Sally Olson Chris Collins Marlene Johnson Brigid Tuck
4. Create a more accurate broadband map that shows actual broadband speeds vs what is advertised as available - Broadband	443	Susan Rynda Richard Peterson Gregory Hagg Janet Nordstrom Judy Hahn
10. Ensure each student in the county has devices to use - Digital equity	397	Kathleen Peterson Scott Schlueter Dottie May

6. Implement a countywide "Dig Once" policy for fiber installation in conjunction with road and other infrastructure projects - Broadband	387	Janet Nordstrom William Paige-Evans Byron Nordstrom
5. Create 24-hour broadband hot spots across the county, including at access at public parking lots, Elysian rest stop, town halls and churches - Broadband	367	Susan Rynda Jill Holden Jeff Ballman
11. Create programs to help low income families with access - Digital Equity	265	Susan Rynda Monica Muchow Taylor Strelow Jim Slinkard
24. Improve cellular coverage through mapping and collective advocacy campaign - Advocacy	260	Byron Nordstrom William Paige-Evans
8. Create more safe spaces for people to access technology equipment and the Internet such as libraries, schools, churches, etc. - Digital Equity	180	Susan Rynda Liz Krocak Joanne Smith
2. Create and maintain a local forum (in-person or online) for Improving communications among key stakeholders – schools, hospitals, Internet Service Providers, large businesses, etc. -for bandwidth sharing opportunities, long term planning, coordination of opportunities - Broadband	151	Sue Rynda Joseph Longbottom
29. Community wide mkt tools for businesses, farms, CSAs, etc to share sharing equipment, connecting ag resources, home consumption/business sharing, and more - Advocacy	130	Liz Krocak Sarah Johnson Malchow Barbara Droher Kline
23. Seek information with medical providers about increasing use of telemedicine/telehealth in the county - Innovation	126	Michelle Dahn Jill Holden
15. Increase the ability of farmers to access online training and information via Farm Business Management programs - Innovation	125	Denise H Reeser
36. Equipment lending, recycling - Sustainability	125	
33. Hold App development camps/classes for youth so kids can learn how to core and create apps - Knowledge Workforce	116	Jeff Ballman Layne Wilbright Dan Braun
16. Create a community technology training program with one-to-one timely advice for residents and businesses - Innovation	105	Chris Collins
27. Communicated directly with residents about broadband via direct mail, email, cable access channels and social media advise them of internet access within the county - Advocacy	97	Jean Keogh Joseph Longbottom

3. Improve Internet access at the County Fairgrounds to allow more community meetings and improve public safety - Broadband	95	Denise H Reeser
12. Install wi-fi on school buses for school transport purposes. Park them in neighborhoods for student access - Digital Equity	95	
34. Increase community ed focus on technology activities for kids and community groups - Knowledge Workforce	91	Dan Braun Layne Wilbright Taylor Strelow
25. Create and maintain a shared countywide broadband website and calendar - Advocacy	78	Susan Rynda Barbara Droher Kline
13. Provide Internet access in subsidized housing developments - Digital Equity	76	Monica Muchow
14. Provide more technology training and one-to-one technology assistance for businesses, including home business and those located in rural areas with social media/online presence, etc. - Innovation	70	Barbara Droher Kline
32. Increase technology skills across skill levels and populations, though events and online resources, such as a "Tech Tuesday" - Knowledge Workforce	70	Lisa Dembouski Barbara Droher Kline
31. Increase theater arts community involvement - Advocacy	65	Chris Collins Jackie Brockway
22. Create and support widespread adoption by community organizations and government of a shared set of technology tools, such as provided by Google. Provide training and technical support - Innovation	55	Barbara Droher Kline
20. Host regular Youth Technology Summits with prizes for innovative ideas and technology projects - Workforce	50	Carl Menk
18. Create a Coworking/training space – with access to internet and training - Innovation	45	Sarah Johnson Malchow
28. Hold welcoming events for new residents - Advocacy	30	Jackie Brockway
17. Install and maintain more digital communication boards throughout the county for information sharing and public safety - Innovation	25	Gregory Hagg
21. Increase county transportation options via ridesharing applications - Innovation	20	Ryan Swafford
19. Create a county fair networking group - Innovation	15	Denise H Reeser
35. Training – zoom for beginners - Knowledge Workforce	15	Heather Ballman
26. Bring knowledgeable speakers into community to learn best practices and new information, Senior corps, etc. - Advocacy	10	Michelle Dahn
30. Publish info on tech resources - Advocacy	0	

Next Steps:

1) The report should be sent out to everyone who participated in either the Vision or Brainstorm meetigs and other key stakeholders. Additional project ideas are welcome and people not in attendance should be welcomed to propose projects or volunteer to be on a project team. Steering team leaders may want to recruit leaders for those projects without volunteers or try to identify other projects that might want to incorporate all or a portion of the project concept.

2) Blandin consultants will schedule a project development meeting shortly to assist team members begin to develop their proposals. Groups are free to begin their work immediately.

3) Don't forget to create a project team to implement the PCs for People distribution of 50 desktop computers.

4) The Project Teams are charged with developing the project, with the lead organization writing and submitting the joint community application. Projects proposals will first be submitted to the Steering Committee for review by a date to be determined. The Steering team will prioritize the applications as necessary. The Steering Team may provide feedback for strengthening selected projects through combining projects, enhanced collaboration or other strategies.

5) Once a slate of projects is finalized, the project descriptions with budgets, including a combined project summary budget should be submitted to Blandin Foundation for administrative approval.

6) Some projects may need to be withheld to await Round Two Blandin Broadband Community Grant funding or may be recommended to pursue other sources of funding.