

Chapter 5

Team Philadelphia – a consensus-building machine

Consensus building is something you need to plan for from the first moment you broach the subject of municipal broadband. Some of you already know what I'm talking about from first-hand experience. There likely are some rough moments ahead. Your biggest political battles may be between departments, not at the state capital. The larger the municipality or county, the more constituent groups there are with different needs and agendas. The topics around which you must build consensus can shift between this month and next.

Everyone working directly on the Philadelphia project and others familiar with it will tell you that this wireless initiative owes a lot of its success to Dianah Neff's ability to get people with divergent interests working from the same page, or at least in the same chapter. Her abilities were certainly tested given that she and her team found that the amount of time they would eventually spend consensus building among a wide ranging network of community, business, political and academic groups was staggering.

A great deal of the success of your consensus building efforts rests on the skills of the person driving the effort to build bridges, form alliances and continually broaden the circle of believers. The rest depends on the project team and steering committee members each being a leader in their own right, carrying the message and working the crowds (figuratively and sometimes literally).

This chapter shows what went into the process in Philadelphia: Dianah's meeting with Mayor Street to present the idea of muni WiFi; getting the Executive Committee on board and in sync; reaching out to diverse constituent groups; responding to the political challenges at both the local and state level. Even though it all looks daunting, it's still manageable.

What you say and how you say it holds the key to consensus building

In the early days of the Philly project, the real meat of many issues often got buried in fiery blasts of rhetoric from certain quarters rather than providing the food for thoughtful discussions and working together. Luckily, the Executive Committee and the project's many supporters managed to rise above the noise to build the necessary consensus to keep it moving, though some of the contentious battles will never really be over until the city's network finally goes live.

Here are several points and recommendations to help shape messages that rally people around a technology that's a little difficult for some of them to fully comprehend. There's always more you can do to ensure that your early stages of consensus building are successful, so the following is only a starter kit for now.

First, whatever your mission is, state it consistently. Wireless Philadelphia has always been on point, describing the project's social and economic objectives in its business plan, Web site and other communication. If your municipality is going to improve government operations first with muni WiFi and then tackle social issues once the infrastructure is in place, be equally as clear. Forget lofty statements. You're not writing the next Declaration of Independence. Rely on simple and to the point, such as "We're going to use wireless broadband to create a more efficient, responsive government." Clarity breeds consensus.

Second, resolve the business model quickly and don't talk about it publicly until you do since this is where roadblocks to consensus building can pop up. If you have no intention of going into the wireless service business, state it starting today. If you plan to create a government/business partnership to offer broadband access services in which the city or county facilitate infrastructure access and service providers provide all of the business logistics of selling and supporting the service, lay it out there. Haven't decided yet which model makes sense until you talk to constituents? Then that's your public statement. The clearer you are on these details, the faster you build consensus. Keep this discussion focused so you minimize misconceptions about your model.

Third, make sure people understand that municipal wireless broadband (muni WiFi) is not DSL. Some critics attack muni WiFi plans by saying "we already have DSL and it's just as good as WiFi." DSL is high speed Internet access service that comes into a home or business through a fixed wire connection. Muni WiFi is high

speed Internet access without the wires. People using it can have just one account and get on to the Net from their homes, in the street, in their offices or anywhere else the network covers. This un-wired access is what enables many of the benefits described in Chapter 2. Use the analogy of “portable DSL” if it helps people understand.

Fourth, make sure you have the facts about your community that help create a sense of urgency to make this project work. The U.S. has dropped from 3rd to 16th in the world in terms of broadband adoption by citizens, and the quality of our broadband is way behind many other countries. State how this impacts your business community that has to compete in a global economy, or disadvantaged businesses that could grow by opening new global markets to stay ahead of local competitors. A recent U.S. government study reveals that 11 million people across all socioeconomic strata in America are illiterate. Relate this to the numbers in your community, and how your WiFi initiative can help reverse the trend.

Fifth, be sure people understand that the economics and deployment logistics of broadband wireless offer advantages over alternative options for residents, businesses and other organizations. Tell them to check the fine print to do the real cost benefit analysis. What will “special low prices” revert to after the promotional period ends? When companies advertise data speeds of between 400 kbps and 700 bps a year, is that true speed or just the speed to download files. When built out properly, WiFi exceeds these limitations going and coming.

Include these along with other performance, price and logistical advantages of WiFi, relating everything back to the mission statement. For example, if your mission is to tackle the social issues of the digital divide, presenting consumer-targeted price and performance facts is important for winning over opponents. Or if your main objective is economic development for disadvantaged businesses, show that WiFi isn't just about low cost technology; it also increases productivity for these companies. As John Dolmetsch, president of Business Information Group in York, PA, says, “when you sign up for a DSL connection, it's working only at your house. When you get broadband wireless access, you get the ability to go anywhere and work from anywhere.”

Sixth, find a tech person who can talk about technology so that the person with low technology-comprehension skills understands. Have him or her write one-page overviews of the various components of broadband networks and the applications you plan to deploy. Several people I spoke with who are pretty smart and whole-

heartedly support the initiative were nevertheless confused by the basics of wireless in their first meetings with representatives from the city. Without clarity when describing what the technology does, recruiting support is challenging as you reach out to the constituent leaders who need to make wireless projects work in their neighborhoods and conference rooms.

Creative, occasionally comical, but never condescending materials are the way to achieve that clarity. Johan Kroes, Senior IT Architect for a financial services company in South Africa called Sanlam, states that “a great part of my job is to explain in simple laymen’s terms what a system can and can’t do. Make little analogies – this application is like a 4 x 4 jeep. It’s great for these tasks, but you can’t race it in the Grand Prix. Or now that you have a Grand Prix auto, do you want to take it on the beach? This connection is like a water pipe in your sink. You can’t force 1000 gallons of water through here quickly.” Make sure the people speaking on the project’s behalf avoid jargon and geek speak.

After shaping the messages to win people over to your corner, the hard work is executing the activities that rally the various individuals and organizations around the messages so they take action that builds the broad support you need to move forward.

Philadelphia puts its ducks in order

The main person to initiate and sustain the opening push to recruit supporters for the wireless initiative - either muni WiFi or department-level applications - may not be the same person to head the steering committee and project team. It could be anyone who has a vision plus an aptitude and interest in learning how wireless can benefit governments. This person needs to be committed to doing a lot of leg work researching general wireless technology and specific potential products for the city so he or she can make a credible case and turn everything over to the eventual project leader. They also should accumulate basic financial data about what these technology options may cost as well as what benefits the city and its stakeholders can reap from the implementation.

Prior to becoming the City of Philadelphia’s CIO in 2001, Dianah had undertaken a similar municipal broadband project in San Mateo, CA. Even though Mayor Street did not ask her about the municipal WiFi until 2004, she never stopped researching the possibilities. “I had been following wireless LANs for quite a while and took note when the FCC apportioned a part of spectrum that was unregulated

because without this we wouldn't have been able to move forward," she states.

Then the IEEE (a group that sets standards for various technologies) approved standards for 802.11b, 802.11a, which is important for indoor wireless access, and 802.11g which facilitates longer data throughput. These standards enable the various infrastructure and hardware products needed for the network to work together and with future products that support the same standards, thus protecting cities' investments from future changes in the technology. Dianah continues, "when we saw that the number of devices such as laptops, PDAs and wireless cards with embedded WiFi chips would hit the billion mark in 2005, that was an important milestone. If you are going to have ubiquity across the city, you have to have affordable devices and they have to be in widespread use."

This preliminary work doesn't have to be a formalized process, nor does someone need to be "officially" recognized to pursue this task, as was the case in Philly. In plenty of companies it's the lone wolf working in stealth mode who does it and when they feel they're ready, will take the idea to the powers that be. So once the legwork is completed, the muni WiFi torch bearer needs to make the first pitch for consensus to the most senior manager or elected official who can give the project legs, and political support to sustain the effort once it picks up momentum.

It may be useful to gather a little informal feedback from constituents. While she was accumulating necessary technical background information, Dianah also put out some feelers locally. She talked to community players to see what they thought about these ideas, particularly the school district and the universities. Everyone was very supportive of the concept of municipal broadband. This plus the changes in the industry influenced Mayor Street to ask Dianah in April to go out and test the idea in a proof-of-concept pilot. It was wildly successful. In two months, and without much publicity from the city, 1200 people signed on to use wireless in Philadelphia's Love Park.

Building consensus within city hall

Many technology initiatives in companies fall short of their potential benefits to the organizations because of the lack of vision and direction from top executives. If you do not have the enthusiastic buy-in for a mobile or wireless implementation from the senior executive team, particularly the president and the person who approves the checks, successes will be limited. The company won't reap the full potential that wireless technologies offer.

Many of the organizations producing impressive results with wireless applications are doing so specifically because they have that top-level support. Once mid-level managers see that this has become a priority for their bosses, they tend to fall in line to ensure widespread acceptance and cooperation from the rest of the organization. The necessary resources are committed, plus you get the extra high-powered backup when the inevitable roadblocks to progress pop up.

The same dynamic holds true in government. The operational structure of government varies by municipality and county. But regardless of whether you have a strong city manager, a strong mayor, part-time elected officials or appointed people running the day-to-day operations, you have to get public support for wireless from the main person at the top who makes things happen. In some places, the person who carries the clout may be one of the senior council members. Know where the power lies and cultivate it. This is also true at the department level. It is possible to launch an initiative without this support, but the chances for success are not great.

The Mayor steps into the breach

“Mayor Street was re-elected in 2003,” states Neff who, as CIO, is also a member of the Mayor’s cabinet. “We looked at what were the goals in this administration, what were the major projects within the city that we wanted to complete. Also, what were those projects that could be started and finished during his administration? I brought up wireless as one of those, and was able to tie that into neighborhood transformation, which had been a cornerstone of his administration since 2000.”

It was a natural progression. The city was moving abandoned cars off of the streets, closing drug corners, greening the neighborhoods. Now they needed to bring in economic vitality and overcome the digital divide in those neighborhoods. Wireless was the technology that could meet these goals. This really wasn’t a hard sell for Philly’s top tech, given the Mayor was particularly predisposed to an idea such as this.

Recalling his election campaign, he states “I was headed to one of those community forums. My opponent spoke before me and he said ‘if I become Mayor, I’m going to have mini-City Halls in every council district because people shouldn’t have to come to Center City to pay their bills.’ After I spoke, someone asked me what I thought about that, and I said I don’t like it. I think it’s a bad idea. The future of this city is online, not in line. The room lit up because people got it. I personally made a

commitment there that we were going to be a 21st Century world-class city. That we are going to lead the way in the area of technology, both as an integral part of the way we do business as a city, and in the kind of environment that we create for the people who live here, work here and visit here.”

So as he listened to Dianah’s briefing, he grasped how broadband should be the lead technology to bring about the transformation he desired. He became a believer. Later at a conference, Mayor Street would reflect on a story he read about a small town with 40,000 people as opposed to Philly’s 1.5 million. At one point they had five homicides in a seven-day period. He looked at their response to this. They were cleaning up streets, boarding up abandoned buildings. They were doing similar things Philadelphia was doing because both cities’ challenges were fundamentally the same. This prompted a thought.

“We think things at one level are going well because we have all of these programs in place,” he says. “But these things alone won’t do it. Clean streets and affordable housing by themselves will not create the bright future that we have for our city. We believe that the future of our city is going to have everything to do with the use of wireless, broadband technology.”

Setting Philadelphia’s wireless efforts in motion was also helped by having a mayor who is committed to personally using the technology. He’s is a self-acknowledged gadget freak who carries a couple of different devices with him everywhere. In quite a few commercial operations, part of IT and business managers’ strategy for getting senior-level support includes giving all of the top executives PDAs. This may or may not be practical or even necessary within your organization in order to get their sign off on broadband.

However, if your senior officials or department managers lack this hands-on experience, show them in stark terms what wireless can do for employees and constituents. Draw clear lines from the inefficiencies of the current ways of doing business and providing services to ROI that is made possible by WiFi. Consider taking a video camera along for a ride with two or three of your field staff who really care about what they do and want to make things better. They’ll show you where the problems are. Bring back visual evidence for the leadership that makes your point crystal clear.

Early leadership can take many shapes

In many small towns and some cities the mayor may be the major initial catalyst. Or the mayor together with two or three other people drive the process from the start as was the case in St. Cloud, FL where the Mayor, City manager and CIO put their plan in motion to provide free wireless access for every citizen and business in town.

“The thing that got me going was a program our school district has for underprivileged children who can’t afford computers at home,” recalls Mayor Glenn Sangiovani. “The district gave each of them a laptop so they could do their homework like the other children. I thought if they couldn’t afford the computer at home, it was possible they couldn’t afford the connection either. I look at this wireless project as another way of closing that digital divide. What good does giving them the laptop do if they can’t get on the Net? When we analyzed the numbers we discovered that \$4 million annually for Internet access charges was heading outside of the city from all of our residents. You look at social impact together with the economic boost that putting money back in people’s pocket is going to give us, municipal wireless was worth investigating.”

Within county governments level, who will drive things varies as much as the types of governing structures. Some counties have an administrator who operates similar to a city mayor, while others have Boards of Commissioners varying in size from three to more than 25 members. These could be elected or appointed officials.

Jeff Arnold, Deputy Director of Legislative Affairs for the National Association of Counties and a member of its Telecommunications and Technology Committee, believes that there needs to be someone assertive who commands a lot of respect taking the activist leadership role. However, who will start the ball rolling is uncertain.

“I think what ends up happening is that the community actually starts the process. A citizen or group of citizens insists this is a service they need. But more often than not they’ll just say ‘we need broadband.’ Either that county’s administrator or a member of the Board of Commissioners has to step up to the plate and say this is something we really want. It’s all about someone understanding the nature of the wireless solution and what it could mean, and being able to articulate this in specific terms. It’s one thing to say ‘wireless broadband.’ But what does that really mean? Is it WiFi, is it fiber? And what happens if people don’t have it? If people haven’t

experienced it, how do you get them to understand what it can mean from a business standpoint as well as a personal one.”

Department level consensus building presents challenges

As for departments within city or county governments, the general dynamics of getting a wireless application project started are the same with a broadband initiative. Either someone on staff believes that wireless can help the department, to which end they do preliminary research and maybe some development work to prove the idea, or the person at the top of the department or the city’s hierarchy gets the vision. For Philly’s L & I Department, one of Acting Commissioner Solvibil’s predecessors provided the spark for their wireless effort.

“Fran Egan was the first Commissioner to put it on the agenda to get us wireless,” he states. “She started us down the path. Under her guidance she hired an IT director and put together an IT staff that Jim Weiss now heads. She used to get in the Managing Director’s face and insist ‘this is what we need to do a good job, so this is what we want!’ If we didn’t have that foundation she started five years ago, we never would have gotten to where we are.”

There are many examples of city departments jumping into the wireless waters. However, quite a few muni WiFi champions run into obstacles when they’re driving to bring the entire government structure onto the network.

Even though there are a lot of forward-thinking department leaders, for example, are they tenured employees or political appointees of the mayor? As forcefully as a mayor might drive the move to wireless, there’s a layer of management that’s tenured and will likely be in those positions after mayors and their appointees have moved on. Some folks in this layer may not share your enthusiasm for new technology and hope they can stall until a new administration is sworn in. Add to that the nature of departmental turf warfare when it comes to budgets, and you have a charged environment that requires deft political skills.

Craig Newman, Director of Business Development for Motorola’s Canopy Wireless Broadband business unit, spends a lot of time meeting with cities. A common problem he finds is that you have a business culture in which, if you try something new and screw up, you’ve got that label for life. It will take the longest time to bring in a new idea if someone’s been burned. For some people, the trick to get them on board is to guarantee them the equivalent to the legal world’s immunity from

prosecution. Put a certain amount of onus for the success of this initiative on the city's project team. Assure managers that they're not going to stand alone on this endeavor.

Of course, this is only part of the approach. You need to find directors' resistance points and figure out how to neutralize them. Public safety directors whose responsibilities include emergency response operations are pretty conservative and the idea of their operations being run on a shared network is a foreign concept to many of them. But budget pressures brought on by economic issues, particularly homeland security demands, are increasing the pressure to quickly find new ways to improve several serious communication shortcomings.

"Public works guys are all utility people for the most part," remarks Newman. "From their perspective, they can't pursue initiatives that raise rates because there'll be a public outcry. In a sense, it's about responding to what the voters want. If there's no incentive or outcry from residents to make things more efficient, then you do just what's good enough to make sure systems work. Also, a lot of these guys don't trust vendors because they've been burned in the past."

The solution therefore is to present ways in which the WiFi infrastructure allows the various departments to enhance their operations for less pain and risk than the departments striking out on their own. Many police officers are riding around with rugged laptops that also happen to have WiFi cards. Show them the easy bridge from current proprietary or cellular networks to faster, less expensive WiFi technology.

"Every department of parking services dreams about a wireless parking meter solution, but they can't cost justify putting the network in place on their own," adds Newman. "Municipal WiFi produces the necessary missing link. Tell managers 'you can do all those things you want to do because the city's picking up the costs for the infrastructure and the access.'" Now your initiative moves from being a potential budget encroachment fight and inter-department tug of war to the early arrival of Santa Claus.

Along these lines, in St. Cloud, FL their mayor brought all of the department directors together, gave them a detailed briefing on the possibilities of wireless and sent them back to meet with their staffs. Each department had to come up with a least one idea of how the technology could specifically help their department.

This effectively got the directors engaged by having them drive the brainstorming for their respective areas so they had some ownership in the project, and they were involved right from the beginning through every step of the process. It wasn't something that was dictated by the mayor. They and their staffs saw the value of what this technology can do for them, they helped build the business case and they had greater influence in shaping the direction of deployment, all of which got them excited about making the deployment a success.

Don't forget the rank and file employees

“The project teams that develop these applications within a business or organization are generally comprised of executives, mid-level management and IT workers,” states Ralph Nichols, Service Program Manager for the Document Messaging Technology Division of Pitney Bowes, who has extensive experience deploying mobile and wireless applications. “These are supposed to be the people who see the big picture. They actually see just a part of the picture. They usually have little understanding of the mobile environment, work-life issues and hassles that remote and transactional workers deal with daily. Many have never had a field assignment.”

No less important than getting top-level buy-in is the consensus building you do with rank-and-file employees when it comes to deploying mobile workforce applications. These employees hold the answer to wireless ROI because if they are resistant to the technology, they won't use it or won't use it well. To ensure success in getting workers' consensus on your technology vision, give them what they want. More importantly, give them what they need. The only way to do that is to bring them onboard with the planning early and keep them engaged in the pilot projects.

Interviews I've conducted in the past few years with line managers in government organizations confirm that their employees are just as interested as their commercial enterprise counterparts in improving how work gets done. But employees also need to see benefits from wireless that are important to them. Some benefits come from process improvements that save them time, or procedures that are made simpler and easier to execute using wireless in their work environments. New process designs for wireless that fail to seriously consider the work environment where they're to be used don't produce positive results.

Consensus building is ongoing, so as you proceed with implementing your pilot project plans, be sure the project team members running the pilots are attentive so they detect and resolve the first signs of end user resistance to the application.

Building consensus within the project team

On the face of it, getting your project team for internal applications on the same page is a straight forward proposition. You bring them in the room, spend some time explaining the vision, assure yourself that they're buying into the vision, give them their marching orders and away everyone goes. However, consensus building for the project team driving the citywide network deployment can present some challenges.

Mayor Street and Dianah Neff did double duty getting the Executive Committee on the same page. The Mayor took care of the first round when he recruited everyone. He and Dianah had worked out the mission statement, so each member was brought on the Committee because they believed in the mission.

The next round was Dianah's as she worked to get 17 people to come to consensus on a business plan that defined a network about which there were many unknowns, and created a business model for which there weren't clear precedents. If that wasn't enough, this plan had to be clearly articulated so Dianah could then build consensus around it from the various constituent groups. The Committee as a body wouldn't be there to help since they were disbanded after presenting the plan to Mayor Street.

If the communities your network serves have diverse constituent groups with varying and sometimes competing needs, interests and goals, the project team or steering committee by default needs to be similarly diverse. This is the best way to bring the perspectives and feedback to the table to ensure that what you propose to your citizens are the tech solutions that they will support. With this diversity on the committee, however, you add more layers of difficulty getting everyone to support a document as complex as a business plan.

Veronica Wentz, Web Site and New Media Director for the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corp. and member of the Executive Committee, states that "everybody was coming from a different place, and not everyone had the same level of understanding about the technology initially. Dianah did a good job of educating the group on what wireless broadband was about and what it can do. Then she asked people to bring back ideas on how they thought the technology could be applied in their business or community."

It helped a great deal that the People's Emergency Center (PEC) had a community WiFi project up and running that was brought into the Wireless Philadelphia

series of pilots because Dianah was able to use this to make the mission less abstract. Wentz continues, “she always presented things to us to show how the technology had already made a big difference in some people’s lives. ‘PEC helps people better integrate into society. They refurbish old computers and have people up and running on the Net. This woman who was handicapped and had kids was able to start a business in her home and she pays \$5 a month for wireless service.’”

Dianah gave very good examples of how, in a small and focused way, this technology was being used. It was really easy to gain support around this. She kept everyone focused on the vision.

Another factor contributing to getting this diverse group in sync was “the fact that the mayor had put out the charge, ‘we’re going to do this.’” adds Pat Renzulli, CIO of the School Board of Philadelphia and also a Committee member. “It was more an issue of how we did it rather than if we did it. I don’t recall that there were many contentious issues. From the outset there were a lot of interviews of constituencies. What these tended to do was increase the reasons why we wanted to launch this project.”

Richard Miller of Innovation Philadelphia concurs. “The discussion level in the group was always collegial versus controversial which helped us be successful. The blend of the people made this work. We all donated a great deal of expertise from our various fields – marketing, financial, technical. People were visionary and we’re used to executing. Our reality was, here’s the project, here’s the concept. Now, how do you go through the process of getting it done? Who you need on the team are people driven by the passion that comes with being able to take a concept and build that concept into a reality.”

Feedback from focus groups which ran concurrently with the business plan writing gave the group even greater determination to make muni WiFi work. It also helped them write a plan with greater persuasive powers in uniting people besides the committee behind the project. Veronica observes that “after learning more about what the community felt, Dianah was able to bring these results into the discussion. She was able to say ‘this is how it’s being received,’ ‘this is how people see applying it’ giving us more proof the idea was good. You need to pick out key points that by default generate universal support and then push these forward to the team and then to the communities.”

Consensus building among constituents

The population size and degree of diversity within your municipality will dictate the breadth of your consensus-building efforts beyond City Hall, while local politics will determine the intensity of your efforts. In cities with a notable range of professions, economic strata, ethnic groups and ages, you should spend time meeting with a lot of groups to get their buy-in initially, to shape the direction of community-focused projects and to keep them updated.

There is a significant risk here as the steering committee – and later the project team managing the network deployment and oversight – tries to establish its vision while helping constituencies refine their respective visions. The grand objective must align with these divergent objectives or else the programs, online content and applications you build for the network will fall short of their potential. For an implementation as visible and controversial as muni WiFi, many constituents won't give you a second chance to prove yourself if you don't get it right the first time. You can build it, but people don't have to come.

Wireless Philadelphia's masterstroke was its 20 focus groups, each one representing a key constituency that collectively gave fair representation to technical, business, service and neighborhood interests. Two subsequent town meetings pulled in a greater numbers of city residents to both learn and provide feedback. These events got the word out to the communities that something exciting was getting ready to sweep Philly. People may not have understood it fully, but they wanted to be at the station when this train came in. "You can really go by what Philadelphia did because Philly did a lot of things right," states Robert McNeil, Principal of the Ronin Group which facilitated the focus groups and town meetings.

With the business plan completed at the end of 2004 and reflecting the wishes of the communities, Wireless Philadelphia moved into the next phase of consensus building. This relied heavily on pilot projects that got constituents in high-profile neighborhoods actively using muni WiFi so the rest of the city would be more likely to support the initiative. The Executive Committee was disbanded and Dianah's remaining project group took on full responsibility for technology deployment. Through Varinia Robinson's efforts, the team still built support for the project, but community leaders became the main drivers for census building within specific neighborhoods, among businesses, on college campuses and within the health care community.

Smaller towns and cities have it easier

Little towns and rural areas tend to be more homogenous than big cities, so you'll likely only have two or three main constituencies to address and subsequently a lot less work to do. The objectives that you try to get people to coalesce around can be very different than what you've read about so far. Do your consensus building early so you get this heavy lifting out of the way, or conversely, find out quickly that the citizens won't support the project. By the time you complete your business plan, your community supporters should be fully on board.

An important thing for small cities and towns to remember is that the Philadelphia's story is one of "We the People," which makes sense given the city's history. As Executive Committee member Robert Bright describes it, "Our approach reflects the characteristics of Philly in terms of demographics and the Mayor's neighborhoods initiative. 'We the People' have an ambitious agenda. 'We the People' want to make the school district better. 'We the People' want to enhance the city to make it attractive for business." When you go about consensus building at the community level, you can pursue some activities similar to those Philadelphia did, but modified to reflect your area and the particular aspects of its respective constituencies.

Philly's strategies may be similar to ones required in smaller cities, such as in the area of economic development, but these municipalities may not want to execute tactics on such a large scale. Smaller towns may have higher average education levels while rural areas might have lower levels. The rate of poverty is different. All those digital divide issues could be there, but in some rural areas it may be due to geographic isolation rather than income. And of course, smaller communities don't draw the same type of political fire. If Kalamazoo, MI decides to own its own wireless network, it's likely none of the incumbents will go out of their way to object.

In the Philly trenches for consensus

In April of 2005, the city announced the business plan, formulation of the non-profit corporation (Wireless Philadelphia) and release of the RFP for the citywide network. Infrastructure was deployed for pilot projects in several tourist areas and communities. These would not only test the capabilities of various vendors' products, but also give the city high visibility platforms that influenced consensus building throughout the city.

One of the vendors bidding on the initiative's RFP was Lucent Technology, so they offered to donate equipment for one of the pilots. In May their community liaison Karen Archer Perry went knocking on doors in the Olney community of North Philly on behalf of Wireless Philadelphia. Her objective was to start building collaborative projects with organizations such as the Lutheran Family and Children's Center.

Brian Loebig, VP of Training and Quality Services for the group, states that "our mission is to help people in need, which dovetails with the city's mission to get technology into the hands of people who need it. To be successful throughout the city, the city needs to continue to form these types of partnerships. If community people understand the services that are available to them, it will help take them out of poverty. Our organization sees the Net as an important way to do this, and this wireless initiative as an extension of the Net's capability. But you also need to have residents in the neighborhood take ownership of the project so they don't view it as someone coming in to do it for them."

It is particularly important that you approach this process without a lot of pre-conceived notions. "In some other neighborhood where a lot of the women stay at home, online Martha Stewart recipes might be the thing to have," Patricia DeCarlo, Executive Director of The Norris Square Civic Association observes. "But that would be in that neighborhood. There were initial thoughts from the City that people could sit in the park here in Norris Square with laptops, which is very middle class yuppie. Our folks do not have little laptops that they can take to the park. As this wireless becomes more real, people become more vocal about what they need to do to make it better. Listen to them. Otherwise you're just wasting people's time."

Business communities may require different tactics

Veronica's organization is pursuing similar efforts with businesses and visitor attraction organizations whose revenues depend on more effective communication with tourists and other visitors. She sees the muni WiFi concept being embraced by quite a few establishments in the restaurant and hospitality industry. As for the business community at large, there are differing opinions on how much you do to get them supporting of the initiative.

"Some say that it's the same type of consensus building in the general community as for businesses in an underprivileged area, but I think it's a little bit different," says Robert Bright, who was appointed to Wireless Philadelphia's Board of Direc-

tors. “Would it be nice to tell businesses ‘these are the benefits of WiFi, this is what it means, over there is such and such?’ Sure, it would be helpful if someone shows you a few things. It’s also possible, as a business owner, to learn some things on your own doing research.”

For merchants whose neighborhoods are their business world, extra efforts to bring these owners on board with wireless would be helpful. But business owners need to understand their customers. If they’re moving to wireless then companies need to go that way. Robert adds, “maybe I’m biased because my clients are not mom & pop operations, so I have a different need. When my clients say ‘we’re going to do all payments electronically now,’ then I’m going to have to figure out how to do business like that. So there has to be some level of owner responsibility depending on whether or not you’re serious about your business.”

An opposite viewpoint comes from those who are directly committed to the economic development and improvement of the city. They believe that that this muni WiFi initiative will create additional jobs, enable businesses to expand nationally and globally through the use of the technology, and make Philadelphia a more competitive market in which to do business. Richard Miller advocates “an education process through a marketing campaign within the city, and also to the world, that shows small business owners the benefits, and how they can expand in ways they never thought of before. This education makes the use of the technology more effective.”

How aggressively you build support from commercial interests depends on how vested the project team is in your economic development effort, whether the discussion is just about businesses in blighted areas or the entire business community. I contend that, if you believe in municipal WiFi, go full out wooing the entire community. Here is where a lot of money, and therefore political clout, rests. It’s easier to keep political opponents at bay at the city and state legislative levels if you have strong business support. Of course, if like Philly, one of the main businesses headquartered in your city is an incumbent such as Comcast, working this tactic becomes a harder row to hoe. You have to play the hand you’re dealt.

General guidelines for constituent consensus building

From City Hall to the pool hall, until you know what people want, don’t try telling them what they need. That’s not consensus building. Let them tell you what they need or want. Focus your public proclamations on key milestones as you reach them, and relate these milestones back to addressing the input you get from constituents.

Think globally about your city, but act locally. Make sure you have a good system in place to quickly identify, recruit and mobilize neighborhood and business champions for the project. Assign people to where they are needed most. The bigger the municipality or county and the greater the challenge, the more champions you need out there bringing the various constituencies into the cause. When all is said and done, when the network is finally deployed, getting citywide usage is going to be a neighborhood by neighborhood effort.

The biggest threat to the success of community relations campaigns supporting this initiative is inaction. Some people will talk or study an issue to death. At some point all of the various decision makers have to shut up and push the “Start” button on building public support. There’s never going to be the perfect technology, political climate, business climate or product price.

Diary of a Community Liaison

From her experiences Karen has distilled several guidelines for maximizing your efforts at building consensus at the constituent level. She is now working under a new boss – herself – as Principal Consultant for Karacomm, specializing in communications and community relations consulting.

Meet people one-on-one. The first step in community consensus building is actually to engage people one-on-one and in small groups to tell them about the upcoming service, answer their questions and ask them about their needs and the needs of their neighbors. People’s ability to get over the technology hurdle and adopt something new requires a personalized view of how it will help them.

Clearly written collateral material is a must. Pay close attention to creating well-designed frequently asked questions (FAQ’s), brochures, maps of potential service areas, and other information that will allow people to understand how they will access the network. If people read good information that’s localized for their community, their interest level and support for the initiative increases significantly.

Municipal wireless is not a one-size-fits-all offer. What people want to do with the technology dictates everything from end user and on-premise equipment to what they’re willing to pay for it. You and the vendors and service providers you partner with must know and be able to explain what technology options best fit which needs.

Identify early adopters. Nothing sells better than local a reference. Use initial meetings to identify early adopters who see the value in the program and who

want to champion the program more broadly in their community. They are the ambassadors for municipal wireless. Look for diversity in initial contacts: such as people from area businesses, church groups, and different cultural groups that will share their enthusiasm with neighbors and associates.

Make the wireless network tangible with launch events or demonstrations. If you are not already surfing at high speed, it's difficult to imagine what it means to have the world of information at your fingertips over the airwaves. Design a demonstration or launch event that showcases both the technology and the content. These must go beyond answering questions about technology, service and pricing. Constituents must get hands-on learning experiences to see what is available to those seeking information, services, education and entertainment, and the speed at which it is accessible.

Plan mini events. While a large launch event or demonstration is a great way to introduce the new service, small activities are good for on-going efforts to reach people and build support. Consider attending chamber of commerce meetings, back-to-school nights, community meetings or even doing something on a street corner that shows off WiFi service. This is possible even if the service is running from a local store or café while you build out a proof-of-concept or pilot network.

Capitalize on interest with a local portal. If you have the resources, create a basic wirelessly accessible community Web portal that links to neighborhood and business groups and includes local news or events. This enables people to get a more personalized feel for what muni WiFi means to them.

Stay connected. Circle back occasionally and check in with these constituents, particularly the early adopters. Continue to share information with them as well as learn from them how to improve your plans and reach more people.

Building political consensus

The most dramatic, near hear-stopping moment in the project came in mid-November, 2004. The Pennsylvania state legislature breathed life into a telco bill, referred to as House Bill 30, that had been sitting moribund for 18 months and with the help of Verizon, slipped a provision in that would have stopped the Philly project in its tracks. The provision forbid any city in the state from building it's own broadband network for which a fee is charged. It was approved in the 11th hour of the lame duck legislative session and sent it to the state senate which passed it with no

public notice.

The action caught everyone by surprise, but most dismaying was that the bill would be on the governor's desk for approval before the end of the month. The city only had a week or so to reply. In swift testimony to the public's support for a concept still in the planning stage, several thousand e-mails, phone calls and letters were unleashed on the governor's office. Several public policy and media reform groups, including Common Cause Pennsylvania, Prometheus Radio Project, Media Tank and Penn PIRG, led the statewide grassroots efforts to encourage a veto.

In the aftermath, the bill passed but Philadelphia won a critical exemption from the law and a guarantee from Verizon that they wouldn't interfere with the city's WiFi efforts. While this particular victory was sweet, the political battles in Philadelphia and many parts of the country have not ended. When asked if there was a way around some of these, Dianah replied "I haven't found anything that's unavoidable. A lot of this has to do with where we are as the leader of the pack. You're out front testing new ground. But every community needs a telco and cable strategy. Always monitor the politics surrounding municipal broadband."

The political issues are going to be different depending on where you are. In some cases you won't be able to get telcos interested in bringing broadband to your area, so they may not be a problem. In some cases, they'll fight you at the state legislature and the incumbents are already fighting it in Congress. How are you going to educate your elected officials on the benefit of the technology? Whether you have a strong mayor, a strong council or county commissioners, you have to work closely with them to get them on board because their support is critical in these political battles.

Achieving victory on the political battlefield

If you must do battle, understand that your two opponents are 1) the incumbents fighting what they fear as a critical threat to the Achilles heel of their business, and 2) a political philosophy that enshrines the concept of free market forces above almost everything else. These require different strategies.

The incumbents are a problem because fear makes conglomerates difficult to reason with and forces you into these life-or-death struggles such as House Bill 30. Philosophically-driven politicians aren't much fun either, but at least cities have a philosophical counter punch that can be quite effective.

The strength of incumbents in their legislative counteroffensive to muni WiFi

centers around money and knowledge since politicians always want money and never have time to learn all the details about everything they need to know. “We certainly see the ‘money’ factor in the 14 state legislatures that are trying to stop municipal broadband,” states Jeff Arnold. “The political reality is that companies that provision broadband in other ways have spent a lot of money with politicians in terms of campaign contributions. We saw that clearly in PA. That’s what that was about. A whole lot of campaign contributions.”

The money issue is why I recommended earlier that you first deploy municipal broadband as a government business operations tool, and then build a strong support base of business people. A few thousand angry citizens can produce results, but sometimes it’s easier for several mayors in the state to rally a few dozen key business people to apply heavy pressure as needed. For some reason, there are legislators who seem to respond a little better to a phone call from a millionaire or two than they do from the average citizen. In the ideal world, having a vocal coalition of community activists and businesses laying on the pressure is best. So, how do you rally the business community around muni WiFi? Point to three hot-button issues.

Bringing businesses into the legislative fray

Unless a company has the clout to whittle an exception from city council, most businesses pay city taxes and fees. Point out that any smart business wants those tax dollars maximized to get the greatest efficiency in services that the city delivers? Everything from building inspections to paperwork processing and traffic control around their places of work will improve with municipal broadband.

Second, public safety issues are business issues. What would happen if business owners’ plant, office buildings or homes suffered preventable losses because their city is hindered from improving its communication infrastructure and operating procedures? As hurricanes Katrina and Rita painfully illustrated, wireless text messaging might be the only communication lifeline business and employees have after a natural or other disaster hits.

Third, most responsible business managers would rather spend \$20/month for high speed access for each mobile worker rather than \$60 - \$80/month for slower speeds. Cities driving partnerships in which a new breed of ISP leverages the latest technology to deliver a superior service at a better price gives businesses a better business technology option that directly impacts their bottom line.

Knowledge distribution is power

With technology-related bills, most local or national elected representatives who don't understand the features and business or social impact of the technology in question rely on someone else to give them that information. Typically, industry lobbyists are the ones who roll in the front of knowledge from which these politicians partake, which needless to say isn't going to paint a pretty picture for municipal broadband.

You need an education campaign specifically targeted to your representatives that not only presents key arguments in favor of muni WiFi, but also delivers the same types of technology-made-simple documents recommended for use in your community relations efforts. Control the discussion and impact bill-writing in your state by influencing what representatives learn about wireless. How you execute this education campaign is dictated by the local circumstances and personalities of your respective legislative bodies. But it is imperative for you to run such a campaign.

Even if your state legislature isn't threatening to prohibit muni WiFi, you have to worry about other laws that can adversely affect your initiative. For example, in Westchester County, NY, an effort took flight to pass a bill requiring Internet cafes and commercial businesses that use wireless networks to take basic security precautions to protect private customer information from potential data thieves and hackers. Fines will be assessed for those that don't comply. Gauging from the resulting blogs written by very tech-savvy people, the intent is commendable, but the approach that the county is trying to codify might be flawed.

The way to minimize these potential minefields is to build a rapport early on between your project team and two or three representatives who are likely to be the main people driving technology bills within a particular body. Newman observes that it's usually the person most knowledgeable about technology whom others rely on to shape how they vote. Having a "trusted advisor" relationship with these individuals keeps you in the loop so you can be proactive rather than reactive while enabling you to gain some level of counterbalance to lobbyists' activities. You want a seat at the table when these late-night bills are being drafted.

Rizwan Khaliq, Global Business Leader for IBM Digital Communities points out where knowledge holds the power to remove the contentiousness from the relationship between municipalities and the incumbents. "There were a lot of sound bites put out early



that generated a knee-jerk reaction from certain service providers. I think that as the business models and the whole thought process mature, government as well as service providers will look for a way to jointly come to the party rather than kicking each other out of the party. They can mutually benefit and even help each other evolve the model so they leverage the capabilities of broadband."

Knowing where those points of mutual interests are may be a little difficult if the incumbents persist in such "scorched earth" legislative and PR tactics we've witnessed so far. Perhaps what's needed is a third participant at the party that has a comprehensive view of how all the parties can benefit. Consider some of the large systems integrators to play this role in bringing government and incumbents together.

When the opponent is philosophy

In the philosophical battle you have conservative state legislators, just as you do in Congress, who say that cities should never be competing with the private sector. The incumbent telcos play this card a lot. You need to bring out your trump card. Ken Fellman, Mayor of Arvada, Colorado and former Chair of the National League of Cities' Information & Technology Committee, spells it out this way.

"The state or Federal government shouldn't be telling local governments what to do. It's easy for us in local governments to argue this and a difficult thing for conservative legislators to argue against because, while they like to be pro-business, most conservative philosophy argues for local control. Whether it's a town of 500 people, or a city of millions, if the citizens examine the issue and they say 'we are willing to spend our tax dollars, we're willing to vote for a tax increase or issue bonds because we think municipal broadband is a good idea in our little town,' then who are you at the state capital to tell us we can't do that? We thought you supported local control? Isn't that what you're party's all about? This argument resonates."

The decision to deploy municipal WiFi is no different than when that same town decides they should issue a bond to build a new road or new baseball fields. Or they want to spend money for bigger pipes in their water system to get more capacity to address the increase in population. That's a utility, right? What legislature is going to tell that local government they can't build it. Then why isn't municipal broadband the same thing? In Colorado, an anti-muni WiFi bill started off with very restrictive rules. By using these arguments, Ken and his colleagues got it watered down to the point where local communities removed the threat.

“In order to fight this battle, look for coalitions because this battle isn’t all liberal Democrats versus conservative Republicans. When you get into these debates, a lot of times it’s the rural areas that aren’t covered and they’re the ones who will benefit the most, at least initially, by putting in a wireless system. A lot of those areas are represented by conservatives who may likely look at the debate and say, ‘this isn’t just business versus government, it’s about local control.’”

Carry this approach up to the U.S. Congress as well. Align Senators and Representatives from rural areas with those whose states that have large metropolitan areas facing significant social and economic issues. You can count on organizations such as the League of Cities and the National Association of Counties to keep these efforts in play as 2006 likely is the year when this issue will peak in the Capital.

At the local level is where the philosophical battle can really hamstring your initiative. When the incumbents come in and say it’s unfair competition, you have some fairly conservative communities that respond favorably to this. There are folks you’ll never be able to convince that any kind of municipal service is ever going to be a good idea because “when the market decides it’s ready, it’ll get here.” You have other citizens who think that this is an appropriate role for local government. Success, therefore, is determined by how well you marshal pro-muni WiFi forces to work for your side.

The same wholes true at the county level where some of the commissioners are resistant because of their belief in the private sector. Jeff offers a tact that enables you to turn the gods of market forces in your favor. “In most cases, the citizens want what they want when they want it. People are beginning to understand wireless more and more. Broadband acceptance is moving quickly because anyone who’s ever experienced it doesn’t want to go back. There’s an interest among those underserved segments to get any kind of broadband. If this is true in your county, discuss the market demand and show how municipal wireless makes sense because it’s the cheapest and fastest alternative.”

Once you build support based on market demand, you’ve elevated the discussion so that people with different philosophies can come to the table and talk about how to get more broadband and more competition into your communities. In some cases that will be the city itself providing services, in others it will be the government seeking private sector partners. You may find that the government/business partnership option is what enables you to find middle ground with the private sector

advocates, and you can move forward.

What if the decision is fait accompli?

In those states where legislation is already on the books prohibiting municipalities from selling any type of broadband service, it's probably safe to say that consensus building is definitely an uphill battle. One option I recommend is go back to Chapter 2, build your business case for using the technology to improve government communication and operations, fund the network and then provide the extra access capacity as a free service. Make sure the system allows you, as does the one in Corpus Christi, to sufficiently secure the city's network operations, servers and other resources from the general public's activities.

Obviously, if you do this, add disclaimers that no customer service and support will be provided, everyone is responsible for their own security and enhancements are possible once their legislators see the light and reverse the ban. While this network isn't going to be as effective and beneficial for your entire city as Philadelphia's network, you should see many grass roots efforts blossom up to provide support and constituent programs in the neighborhoods. Your social and economic development efforts will still have a platform as long as there aren't any fees charged. Companies' IT people should be able to tap in and provide some basic mobile application integration with the network. In fact, a little eco system of consultants might spring up to smooth things out.

The end goal here, by the way, is not to create a permanent workaround. That's just a short-term benefit. What you really want to do is get the laws changed. Once you get people addicted to broadband, they're going to want to do more and they're going to want the next evolution of the technology, whatever that may be. As the masses start to agitate, inform them that the road to their desires is blocked at the state capital by the representatives of the people. Then turn your citizens loose. You read about House Bill 30 and what people can do in just a week when they get sufficiently motivated. Sometimes you have to play a little hardball to get the consensus you want.

To sum it up

Consensus building is the lifeblood of a successful municipal broadband deployment. Plan on it, insist on it, execute on it. Ken concludes, "I believe, and others I know believe that good local leaders try to see the future and where we need to go. Then we help people get there a little faster than they would if you weren't pushing them. If you're really good at it, you have people think they got there all by themselves."

