

The city with the best fiber-optic network in America might surprise you

Community broadband creates competition and better service and choice—along with giving local residents ownership.



[Source Photo: Zechariah Judy/Wiki Commons]

BY JAY WOODRUFF – PUBLISHED BY FAST COMPANY

Which American city has the most sophisticated fiber network?

San Francisco? Nope.

New York? Nah.

It's Ammon, Idaho, population 16,500, which offers residents performance, pricing, and options that inhabitants of a metropolis dominated by one or two internet service providers can only dream of. Ammon is a true local network, where residents own the fiber and providers compete to serve them.

“If you were to ask me what the key component of Ammon is, I would say it's a broadband infrastructure as a utility,” says Bruce Patterson, Ammon's technology director and one of the key drivers behind the network. “We've just found a way to make it a true public infrastructure, like a road.”

Residents of Ammon can choose to opt into the network, which the city began building in 2011. Patterson expects that by the end of 2019, 900 of the town's 4,500 residences will have joined the network. The city is growing, adding new residential addresses at a rate of about one per day, and Patterson says that every single developer is choosing to include the fiber infrastructure in new construction.

Patterson describes four ways in which Ammon's model is superior to other existing networks.

PUBLIC UTILITY

The city of Ammon manages the network the same way it handles water services or road maintenance. "If we could simply come to a point as a nation where we would say internet infrastructure is essential and we're going to make sure that everybody has access to it," Patterson says, "that would be a huge step forward."

CHOICE

By offering residents and businesses the option to own their own fiber, either paying up front (about \$3,200) or \$20 per month for 20 years, Ammon forces providers to compete for customers. There are eight local ISPs, and users can switch among them instantly without requiring a "truck roll" (a visit from the ISP to adapt hardware at the customer's location), because Ammon uses software to "virtualize" the network.

MORE FOR LESS

The Ammon network has reduced the cost of a 1 Gbps connection available via one of the ISPs from \$99 a month (with a minimum three-year contract) to \$9.99 a month with no contractual obligation. Whether choosing the free 15 Mbps option or 1 Gbps, participants receive guaranteed throughput. "It's not just about bandwidth," says Patterson. "It's about service."

SMARTER CITY

Ammon network participants are connected to a smart grid that offers access to a variety of municipal services, including public safety and utility services, with more planned. Members can also easily establish their own private networks with friends and family (or coworkers for businesses) without incurring any additional infrastructure costs.

"There is an evolution of the internet that will happen over the next decade or two," Patterson says. "We're trying to accommodate what we see as the future of the internet, which is people not having to just use the public internet but being able to create private connections for their own purposes without having to pay for a whole 'nother infrastructure to do it."