Community Involvement – The digital divide in rural areas disproportionately excludes the opportunities to build knowledge, wealth, and engagement in the 21st century. Compound this with the COVID pandemic, it has only exacerbated the problem in communities across the country. The City of Cabot held numerous town hall meetings to address this issue, and created solutions for the future. Collaboration with the administration, school district, business leaders, residents and legislators has been vital to the success of this project. Furthermore, the partnership with a local provider has provided the experience needed to set this plan in action with expediency.

Innovative Approaches - While traditional funding through state and federal agencies is available, communities around the country are all competing for the same dollars. The City of Cabot understood the importance of providing a fiber-optic network that would cover the entire city, and the capital investment that would be needed to accomplish this monumental feat. Through legislation changes, a ballot incite approval, and partnership with a broadband provider this plan provides City-wide 1 gig internet service for the businesses and residents of Cabot. This would not only allow the city to provide internet services as a public utility, but it would also be the first project of its kind to start construction in the state of Arkansas.

Implementation Success - In partnership with the city of Cabot, Connect2First was contracted to build a fiber-optic internet and phone service network that will serve to provide communication resources and assist with the continued growth of the city.

Sustainability – The sustainability of broadband in rural communities is vital as it enables access to essential services, supports quality education, enhances healthcare accessibility, and drives economic development. By bridging the digital divide between urban and rural areas, broadband connectivity empowers individuals, strengthens communities, and ensures that rural residents can fully participate in the digital revolution that is transforming our world. This is not only a matter of equity, but also a strategic investment in the community's long-term prosperity and resilience.

Positive Change – The City of Cabot and Connect2First are working together to build and maintain a fiber-optic network for the citizens of Cabot and trailblazing the path for other communities across the State. As this project continues to move forward it will be will become an integral part of the community and economic development for years to come.
Communities across the state are faced with many challenges that stifle the opportunity for growth and expansion. Over the years, the need for reliable and accessible broadband has been at the forefront of many initiatives and platforms in government. However, it has become apparent that local and state government cannot forge ahead alone, and must rely on the expertise and institutional knowledge of providers in the state. In addition, the state constitutional framework did not allow for municipalities to rely on broadband as a standalone, or sole utility for cities. Compound this with the extraordinary cost associated with a large-scale capital project, it seemed that providing access to residents and businesses would be out of reach for communities outside the metro area. In collaboration with many stakeholders, the City of Cabot was able to find creative and innovative solutions to provide the highest quality of fiber internet to the city and its surrounding communities.

As local administration changed in Cabot, so did the vision and foresight for establishing the city as a progressive community that was interested in attracting new businesses, residents and amenities. However, the city did not own or control any existing utilities, and the state constitution did not allow broadband as a sole ownership within a city. In 2021, Mayor Ken Kincade along with local legislators advocated to the state to add this provision so Cabot, along with other cities across the state, could provide this service and revenue for growth. As it passed through the appropriate channels for approval, the city administration shifted their attention to the next hurdle. The monumental task of finding the substantial funding that would be needed to accomplish this project.

Through town hall events, city council work session, community meetings, and very long days the administration formulated a comprehensive plan to present to the voters of Cabot. With complete transparency, local leaders successfully outlined the goals for the bond extension, and the long-term benefits to the community. With an overwhelming response Cabot voters approved maintaining the city’s current sales-tax rate, and would issue $72 million in bonds for Community and Economic Development projects. Residents were asked to consider 10 separate ballot initiatives that included refunding the current bonds, infrastructure,
public safety, and efficiency improvements. The most substantial investment on the ballot was the $20 million that would be dedicated to allow the city to own its own fiber optic network solution. This would also allow the city to partner with a local provider to develop faster internet speeds, offer lower prices, and deliver better customer service for the residents of Cabot. After a competitive RFP process, the city of Cabot awarded the bid for services to First Electric Cooperative, and its wholly owned subsidiary Connect2First. This would not only allow the city to provide internet services as a public utility, but it would also be the first project of its kind to start construction in the state of Arkansas.

The partnership between the city of Cabot and Connect2First will offer a continual benefit throughout the duration and after the completion of the fiber-optic project. In the short term, consumer spending by on-site contractors will provide temporary funds to the city during project construction, and short-term gains in sales tax will provide additional revenue. As project work is completed, economic development becomes the focal point of the long-term benefits of the project. Cabot citizens will have faster access to healthcare, more available opportunities in business, and increased access to entertainment and other online services. While limited opportunities are leading many to commute to larger metro areas, increased access to fiber-optic internet will allow the local population to grow and thrive.

Outside communities could also benefit from having a fiber-optic infrastructure. Project plans can adapt to a town and be based on specific needs whether this is general economic development, education, or access to outside services in homes and communities that are more spread out than the more urban or suburban communities.

The original goals for the Connect2First project in the city of Cabot were developed as an extension of Connect2First’s parent organization, First Electric Cooperative: Improve the quality of life. With digital connectivity becoming just as important as electrical power, there became a need to provide fast, reliable and affordable internet. Without this, small towns and other rural communities are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to accessing vital services, working or attending school remotely, or simply enjoying entertainment options. With the city of Cabot, Connect2First’s goal is to use it experience in building a fiber-
optic network to provide high-speed internet and phone service that will impact community growth, economic development, educational performance and opportunities, and ultimately, quality of life.

In financing this project, Connect2First provides the funds necessary to operate, maintain and upgrade all active electronics needed to ensure service to all customers. This includes Connect2First being staffed with sales and customer service representatives, technicians and engineers, and management with extensive experience in telecommunications and other related fields. The continued funding of construction and maintenance comes from the services offered to customers based upon their individual needs. These services are presented as three service tiers: Basic, Premium, and Ultimate. Each tier provides a different speed offering with speeds being symmetrical, both upload and download speeds being the same based upon the tier chosen. Along with these offerings, customers will have the option to lease additional Wi-Fi extenders, based upon the size of the home, and subscribe to HomePass, a mobile app that allows users to monitor their home network and devices that are currently connected. These services are also extended to businesses and can include upgraded technical support options along with a similar mobile app called WorkPass. In addition to internet services, Connect2First also offers phone service by transitioning traditional landlines to VoIP capabilities with fiber-optic lines. This particular service can be bundled with C2F’s internet service or purchased separately.

While Connect2First continues to provide fiber services to rural communities, the project with the city of Cabot will be the first of its kind as this project provide the backbone to a network that will become as much a part of the city’s infrastructure as its roads. This project will allow the city of the Cabot to truly become one of the first gig-cities in the country.

As of this article, citizens with Cabot city limits are already signing up and homes and businesses are being connected directly to this project’s fiber-optic network. With Connect2First building upon the relationship created between the city of Cabot and First Electric Cooperative, Connect2First will become an integral part of the community and economic development for years to come. The leadership of Cabot continues to work towards offering the best in family living and a high quality of life, and Connect2First to provide and build through shared values and partnerships.
It is the goal of the city of Cabot and Connect2First to increase the appeal of Cabot as a place to live and work. The existence of a fiber-optic network has shown to have a positive effect in per capita incomes and property values. With connected services, the city would have the tools available to limit population loss, increase opportunities for current and future citizens, and breathe new life into this rural community. The community has remained vocal about its wants and needs regarding the technology being introduced into the community. This has allowed the project to grow and transform based on the city’s needs. The simple explanation for this project is that the city of Cabot and Connect2First are working together to build and maintain a fiber-optic network for the citizens of Cabot and trailblazing the path for communities across the State. In completing the project, the city will be able to provide opportunity and progress to a growing rural community for continued success.