

RURAL BROADBAND INSIGHTS FOR CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE



WITH PARTNER JONATHAN CHAMBERS

Co-ops Connect FYI

By Jonathan Chambers • Sep 27, 2024

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A Leading Lights Award



Earlier this year, *Light Reading* announced its shortlist for its Leading Lights Awards. Conexon, Washington EMC (Georgia), and Tri-County Electric Cooperative (Florida) were one of ten finalists in **Outstanding Use Case: Bridging the Digital Divide**. The award is for the company or institution presenting the best example of how it is successfully working to broaden access and reduce barriers to affordable internet connectivity for underserved communities.

The finalists included broadband deployments across the globe, using different technologies, different transmission media, and different business models.

‘Bridging the Digital Divide’ Finalists

- Baicells – Connecting the Tohono O’odham Tribe in Arizona
- Calix – Broadband Academy & The Broadband Success Playbook for Tribes
- **Conexon, Washington EMC, Tri-County Electric Cooperative – Conexon Connect Fiber Broadband Impact**
- DZS, Connect2First, Irby Utilities – City of Cabot Fiber Network
- Fibertime Networks, Nokia and VulaCoin – South African Internet Access
- HFCL – Baidabettu and Baslambi Villages
- Hughes and Mexico’s SICT – Isla Santa Margarita Smart Village Project
- Hughes, Microsoft and Colombia’s MICT – Juntas de Internet: Connectivity Communities
- Tarana Wireless and Choice Broadband – Navajo Nation project
- Veea – Veea Digital Divide Solution for Argamukti, Indonesia

We learned this week that Conexon Connect Fiber Broadband Impact (Conexon with Washington EMC and Tri-County Elective Cooperative) won.

I recommend the podcast conducted by Nicole Ferraro of *Light Reading* with Wendy Sellers, President/CEO of Washington EMC, Julius Hackett, CEO of Tri-County Electric, and me.

You can listen here: <https://www.lightreading.com/fttx/the-divide-how-two-rural-co-ops-are-connecting-their-communities-with-conexon>

What the Award Is About



For nine years at Conexon, we have had one mission – deploying fiber-optic broadband to rural U.S. areas that lack adequate service. We have tried everything to remove barriers for electric co-ops to deliver broadband service to their members.

- **We have innovated design and construction** methods to reduce cost.
- **We have negotiated preferential purchasing agreements** with materials and equipment vendors.
- **We helped break the telecom stranglehold on government funding** and secured more public funds for electric co-ops than any company in history.
- **We set up a telephone company** for electric co-ops so they didn't have to enter the voice business.

Then, in 2020, we developed a business model for those electric co-ops that didn't want to operate a broadband network. The model was developed in collaboration with co-ops from

Georgia. The Connect model has since expanded from Florida to Colorado. The Leading Lights award recognizes the innovation of this business model.

Washington EMC and Tri-County Electric Cooperative are wonderful exemplars of the model, in which the co-op owns the fiber network that Conexon builds and operates for the co-op. The two co-ops collectively serve nearly 30,000 members across more than 5,000 miles of electric distribution plant. Washington EMC reaches 100% of its members with fiber; Tri-County Electric is only weeks away from doing the same.

These co-op members have the option of affordable plans for 100 Mbps, 1 Gbps, or 2 Gbps symmetrical service. Currently, nearly 40% of these co-ops' respective members are subscribers.

Conexon started construction in the fall of 2021, to unserved populations with average densities of less than 6 members per mile.

- These areas lacked adequate broadband service because over the past three decades, no cable or telecommunications company would build in their communities. **Yet, it only took three years to reach everyone.**
- Both projects started during COVID, with all the associated supply chain disruptions and inflation. **Yet, both projects were built on time, on budget, and now are profitable businesses for these co-ops.**

This weekend, Tri-County Electric and Washington EMC crews will be repairing poles and restoring electric service as Hurricane Helene makes its way across Florida and Georgia. Conexon's crews will be there too, repairing any affected fiber and restoring any disrupted broadband service. I'll be praying for the safety of everyone in these communities and working in the field to restore service these next few days.

Feel free to forward this **Co-ops Connect FYI** to colleagues who want to stay in the know on all things broadband! Subscribe to Conexon's weekly newsletter [here](#).

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