



# STATE BROADBAND PLANNING: A Strategic Methodology

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Creating a strategic broadband plan does not have to be daunting. Using the proper framework, local governments, state broadband offices, and even private operators can develop and document actionable initiatives for the future.

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## OVERVIEW

In recent years, and in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, state and local governments have created broadband offices with the goal of increasing the availability, reliability, and affordability of high-speed internet for all its citizens. Furthermore, both state and national legislation have created vast funding opportunities to bridge the digital gap between communities with access to high-speed broadband and communities without it. There is a new normal regarding the number and magnitude of services that are moving into a 100% digital space, and communities without access or digital literacy can become marginalized in the process. The Federal Communications Commission, along with states and other stakeholders have begun mapping out the serviceability of current broadband providers, to help identify the actual need for investments in infrastructure. To address these emerging needs and turn them into a strategic plan for the next 5 years, we've designed a simple 5 step process for organizations to follow, and as part of that, set Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) to make sure that the most important success factors are measured. In this article, you will find guidance on how to dive into strategic planning and thoughts on potential OKRs to drive broadband and digital equity results.

The rapid scale up of broadband deployment required by the dynamic needs of citizens, and governments alike, can be daunting for both broadband offices and operators. How can they ensure that their plans include the correct stakeholders? How can they equitably and efficiently allocate funding to improve broadband availability across the state? What should be measured to ensure progress and accountability? How can state governments make sure that plans are implemented on time and on budget? How can they ensure that plans stay alive and are readjusted according to changing needs?

## STRATEGIC PLANNING OVERVIEW:

A comprehensive strategic planning process consists of five main steps. These five phases combine to develop a “living and evolving” picture of the current state, future vision and goals for the organization (or government agency), and specific actions for achieving those goals. The five-phase process emphasizes stakeholder engagement to ensure the plans have the perspectives and buy-in needed to drive the execution of the plan long term.





## 1 Current State Assessment

During this first phase the main objective is to clearly understand the current situation, including opportunities and challenges that the state faces internally and externally. To grasp the full picture, we gather extensive information from stakeholders to build a profile of the state's current situation, revealing both gaps and strengths.

A state broadband office's current state assessment should consider including four main dimensions:

- A) **Broadband deployment** (Geographic assessment of infrastructure or serviceability)
- B) **Broadband usage** (Study the actual broadband speeds registered, tested in an area)
- C) **State provided internet Access & Digital equity** (State-provided internet centers, Wi-Fi hubs, or computer centers)
- D) **Commercial landscape** (Providers in an area, pricing, service options, and customer experience)

**Broadband deployment** refers to the availability of broadband infrastructure throughout the state's geography, and the access technology of the connections at each area of deployment. This includes infrastructure owned by both government and private companies. It also includes evaluating low-cost opportunities for expansion by looking at state owned utility infrastructure both current and future. This assessment usually accounts for the number of locations (residential or business) that are "serviceable" by any carrier. A "serviceable" location is often defined as a home or business that can request a broadband connection and would not require material construction from an operator to be able to connect, which also usually means it can be served in less than a week.

Beyond deployment, a comprehensive assessment should include current performance metrics or **Broadband Usage** throughout the geography in question. This evaluation could take shape by using resources like Ookla speed maps, surveying or simply by evaluating the number of homes passed.

The FCC's broadband maps, including the new broadband data fabric, often overstate the serviceability status of certain geographic locations and even regions. These inaccuracies lead to lower funding allocations for states on a federal level and more importantly, leave citizens without broadband services. By combining the FCC data with other sources including the NTIA Indicators of Broadband Need Map and Ookla's coverage and speed maps, a state can show the actual broadband availability by location.



**State-provided internet access** refers to a citizens' ability to obtain internet connectivity, publicly or privately, subsidized by the state or local government. The state must account for public access points, including physical spaces where Wi-Fi is publicly available as well as public Wi-Fi networks. The state must also analyze the need for internet subsidies. This analysis could include assessing the NTIA Indicators of Broadband Need Map, The American Community Survey, and the Affordable Connectivity Program Enrollment Data. By combining data providing the gaps in broadband adoption with poverty data, one can extrapolate where affordability is a decisive factor in broadband adoption.

**Digital equity** refers to the citizens' ability to effectively use the connectivity provided to its full potential. This would include evaluating the availability and effectiveness of digital training and technical assistance programs by taking an inventory of current offerings. It would also include taking stock of the accessibility and affordability of devices. This could be measured by a combination of elements, including affordability, usage based on mean household income, digital usage, including usage rates for the state's digital services (online services demand versus traditional physical visits to government centers), number of citizens working online or remotely, versus traditional in-person jobs.

Finally, a solid understanding of the **Commercial Landscape** will help a state understand who the players are, and which operators can become potential partners in developing an actionable broadband plan. The commercial landscape includes the number of operators, the technologies that they deploy, their pricing plan, their customer value proposition, and their commitment to supporting the community.

By analyzing the current state of these five dimensions, local governments can begin to set objectives to make broadband available, accessible, and effectively used by citizens. While these five dimensions are integral to a broadband office's strategic planning, the office should also consider unique needs or priorities that need to be evaluated, such as workforce development to build out broadband infrastructure, fund optimization, permitting, private partnerships or workload distribution within the broadband office.

## 2 Goal Setting

During the goal setting phase, we define the strategic direction that the organizations should take and specific goals they will strive to achieve in a particular period. These goals should be high-level and should aim to bridge the gaps identified in the current state assessment. To define these goals, we suggest using OKRs, or an objectives and key results framework, in which we identify specific and actionable goals, the objectives, and create measurable criteria to track success.

Based on the four dimensions mentioned above we can develop comprehensive objectives to drive our strategic plan forward:

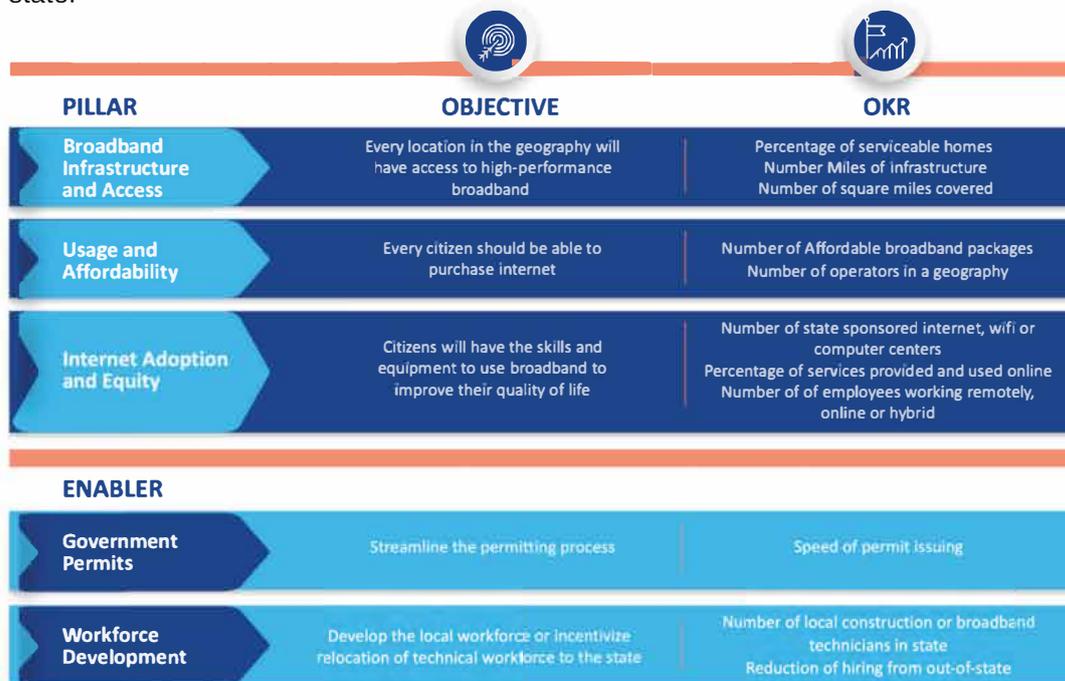
In terms of broadband deployment, an objective may look like "Provide high-speed internet to all citizens in the next 5 years". Then based on that objective, our key result may be specifying a % of homes serviceable with high-speeds or a % increase in number of homes served. We suggest breaking these objectives down into four or five main ones which become pillars for the strategic plan itself.

Along with the main strategic pillars, most plans commonly include strategic "enablers"



that have an impact across all OKRs. These strategic enablers can include efforts by the state government to provide additional momentum to the plan. Permitting and workforce availability are common bottlenecks we have seen in broadband deployment, but by placing an emphasis on their development, states can transform them into enablers.

States can focus efforts on improving permitting processes and speed of delivery by setting ambitious targets (or OKRs) to give infrastructure builders confidence and agility. This will require defining a set of initiatives and could entail an investment in process improvement or digital transformation work.. In terms of workforce availability, most states can partner with their local workforce development board and set their own targets to increase the number of technicians in the state, whether it be via training, academic subsidies, or by incentivizing permanent relocation of these resources to the state.



### 3 Strategic Development

During the strategy development phase an organization defines strategic initiatives and builds a detailed plan with activities, responsibilities, and investment needs of each strategy or initiative. This process must include extensive consultation with key stakeholders, including community and advocacy groups, to ensure the necessary buy-in to propel implementation forward, after the planning phase has closed. During this phase the team could also begin to design initiatives related to areas of the scope of work beyond the preparation of the State Plan.

In this stage, OKRs are re-evaluated critically in order to make sure that the initiatives proposed will help achieve the Key Results developed in the previous phase. Some of the main activities include priority setting workshops, conducting initiative validation interviews, and developing timelines for the plan.



The outcome of this stage is a specific prioritized plan with a clear path for the mid- and long-term success of the office. For example, creating a funding opportunity for collaboration with private companies to build out high-cost infrastructure, creating a plan to expand the number of free Wi-Fi centers across the state in public buildings, or designing a mapping tool that shows the status of the broadband offering at each census block to support prioritization initiatives.

## 4 Strategic Implementation

Based on the plan set forth during the strategic development phase, then leverage project management tools and methodology to ensure the successful implementation of the plan.

Dependent on the office and their plan, this stage could include the actual infrastructure construction, revision to legislation, request for additional budget assignment, communication, and marketing plan execution, KPI dashboard implementations, program management office set-up, among others.

## 5 Feedback & Review

As a final phase of the strategic plan, the state must define the metrics by which they will periodically review the overall progress of the plan to refine direction and strategies for the future. This stage could include evaluation of the new organization, revision to governance processes, or compliance status checkpoints. Ideally, a broadband office will have quarterly and yearly reviews of this strategic plan, in which stakeholders will be able to challenge the direction of the plan, based on OKRs or changing market dynamics.

## Stakeholder Engagement

Throughout any Strategic Planning process, garnering buy-in from all stakeholders is crucial. In broadband deployment, it is imperative to include public and private entities and non-profit organizations to ensure engagement and alignment with the plan's long-term goals. It also ensures that a diverse group of voices are heard and in turn that communities receive what they truly need in terms of broadband deployment. Stakeholder engagement should be a guiding principle for the creation of a broadband plan and should be present in all stages

## CONCLUSION

Creating a strategic broadband plan does not have to be daunting, under the right framework, state broadband offices can undergo a structured process to develop and document their vision for the future with actionable initiatives to get there. **V2A's Strategic Planning methodology**, along with solid a *project management* approach, comprehensive *stakeholder engagement efforts*, and robust *change management*, can truly enable a future-proof strategy. This methodology will also be useful for broadband planning in general, or as part of any strategic infrastructure planning process in the Telecommunications sector, the utilities sector or any other capex intensive industry. At V2A, we understand that the goal of bridging the broadband gap, and enabling a universal digital transformation will be a continuously evolving endeavor that can benefit from a structured Strategic Planning process.



INSIGHT

