



Future-Proofing Connections

Peoples Telephone has been looking ahead since 1952

THERE'S UNTOLD VALUE in connecting with others. Study after study indicate that social connections are tied to reduced anxiety, stress and health risks as well as increased well-being. In addition to social benefits, our ability to connect affects the ways we conduct business, shop, receive medical attention, pay bills and even enjoy entertainment.

Peoples Telephone, a nonprofit rural cooperative, has been in the business of connecting communities since it built its first telephone pole in Golden on August 13, 1952, and brought phone service to unincorporated areas of rural East Texas. At that time, those connections were for landline telephones. No one could have predicted the digital revolution that would decades later influence and shape all aspects of life.

As technology advanced, so too did Peoples Telephone, adding capabilities and services such as long-distance calling, modern security systems, dial-up computer service, DSL service and then fiber-optic internet connections. Because of state and federal telecommunications regulations, the cooperative now has members in the regulated market and traditional customers in the deregulated market; all told, Peoples has some 31,000 connections under its umbrella.

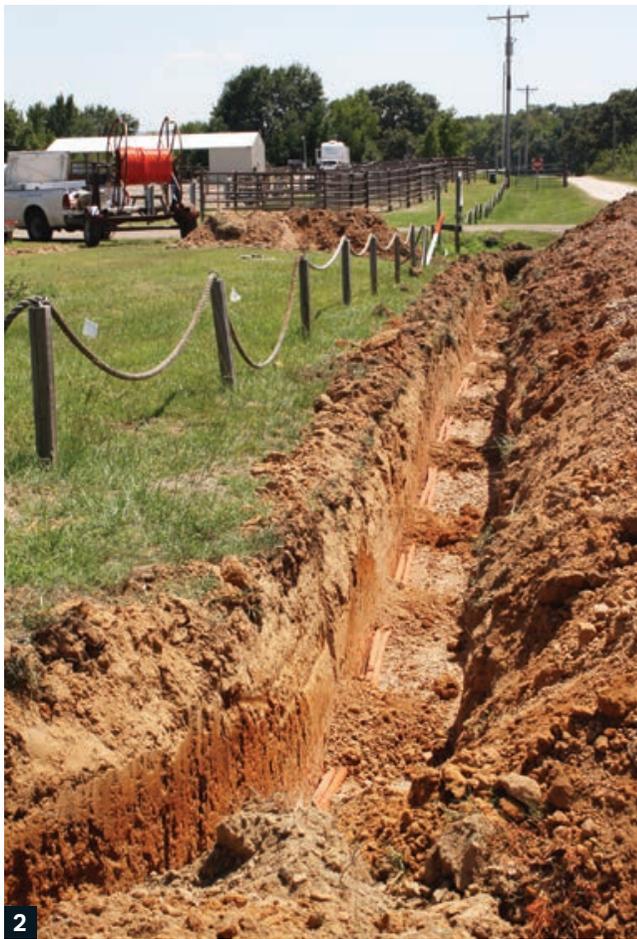
There's never been a time in human history when connec-

tions weren't important. But the speed and modes of communication now available have made real what was once only in the imaginations of science fiction writers. For example, in 1996, when Peoples first offered internet connections through phone lines, transferring a 56-kilobit packet of information in a second was a significant achievement. Nowadays users can speedily send many gigabits across the internet in a second thanks to fiber-optic cables—that's over a million times the amount of data.

Steven Steele, general manager at Peoples, said his cooperative reached a milestone in 2010, when it was allowed to serve both markets. The co-op bid on and was awarded a grant from the federal government made available through the Great American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The purpose of that initiative was to lay the foundation to deliver broadband service to rural and underserved communities.

While an ambitious goal, closing the digital divide for community members fell within the sweet spot of Peoples' mission and its passion for connecting folks. Beating out much larger companies and consortiums to earn a piece of the pie, Peoples was awarded a \$28 million grant.

"That grant required us to put in about 600 miles of fiber cable,



1. Scott Thompson, left, Peoples Telephone assistant general manager, and Steven Steele, general manager, are proud of the efforts of the co-op's employees and contractors, who brought a tier 2 fiber-optic network and many opportunities to the region.

2. Electric cooperatives smooth the way for rural broadband by notifying Peoples of new construction and allowing Peoples to lay cable alongside underground electric infrastructure as it's installed.

so we built a loop around Northeast Texas," Steele explained.

That was no small feat. The network footprint encompasses Paris, Bonham, Terrell, Forney, Canton, Van, Mineola and Emory. Two routes also travel into Dallas for internet access and contribute to the high speeds Peoples can provide its users. In all, with the company adding an additional \$7.4 million, it completed the scope of the grant work in 2013. Now it has a \$36 million tier 2 network to show for it.

With this system, Peoples can deliver fiber internet directly to homes across Northeast Texas.

"Fiber to homes, we feel like, has future-proofed our network because with fiber to your home we can run a variety of speeds," Steele said. That includes 100-megabit service, which is more than adequate for most homeowners, but that same fiber allows Peoples to provide gigabit service to individual users. To put that in perspective, Steele said, "Once upon a time we ran all of East Texas on a gigabit."

Steele explained that Peoples designed its system to handle future speeds of up to 100 gigabits. "We have no idea what you would do with that, but we can do it," he said.

And that's just it: What the future holds is unknown, but the leaders at Peoples believe their system will function for any need.

Peoples has more than 4,000 connections in the deregulated market and will continue to expand in that space. Within its cooperative network, the provider has more than 1,000 fiber

connections. Peoples recently secured funding to accelerate their initial 5-year construction plan to a three-year plan to add an additional 4,000 members.

"Everyone needs more speed. Especially after the pandemic, they know they have to be able to work from home," Steele said. "They have to be able to educate from home. Entertainment is now a critical function of broadband. All of that requires more bandwidth and the flexibility of fiber."

Mcxie Hurst, marketing manager at Peoples, said that all of the co-op's employees are doing their best to expedite the process because they understand that these connections are no longer a luxury but a necessity. They know broadband affects the future and the types of businesses that can develop.

"This is an ambitious undertaking that Peoples is willing and wants to do for our members," she said.

The co-op employees 117 full-time workers and about 20 contract employees as well as several construction contract companies that bring to bear about another 150 employees. Working together, the cooperative's workforce can install an average of 1 mile of fiber in a week. Once the fiber is within range, it's then connected directly to a customer's house or business. That's in contrast to some providers, which claim they are using fiber but whose fiber lines may stop at a subdivision or community connection point, with the end user not getting the true fiber advantage. Peoples Telephone customers are directly connected to Peoples' fiber lines.



PEOPLES

While Peoples has a robust and willing employee and contractor framework, it also likes to point to its superior working relationships with electric cooperatives in the region, including Bowie-Cass, Farmers, Fannin County, Grayson-Collin, Trinity Valley, Upshur Rural and Wood County electric cooperatives. When the cooperatives are building underground facilities to new subdivisions, they notify Peoples. When appropriate, broadband cable gets laid at the same time. The joint effort helps all entities, since fiber-enabled property sells faster, helping to ensure each entity's investment is returned more quickly.

"When it comes down to it, the reason our partnership is so good and so beneficial is that we have a joint goal, and that's to benefit our cooperative members," Steele said. "That's what drives us, and we understand that about each other."

Peoples Telephone's own cooperative members are the driving force behind its decision to accelerate its plan from five years to three. Peoples consistently receives inquiries about the timing and availability of broadband from its members, with pleas to hurry.

"Members can call us every single day. We don't mind, and we'll give them a status," Hurst said, adding that once a fiber installation project begins in a neighborhood, "We'll leave no rock unturned to notify you of availability." They send post-cards, letters and emails and make calls to each household within the footprint of a new project. You'll know when broadband availability is coming to you.

While broadband is a prime interest of the community,

Peoples continues to serve members and customers in other ways, too, with phone service, security systems and voice-over-internet phone systems.

Steele credits the co-op's talented workforce for its continued prosperity.

"I would put our employees up against any group I have worked with in my entire career," he said. They are highly adaptable, which is a necessity in an industry that has changed so much in just 10 years. "The teamwork here is second to none. And that makes it a nice place to come to in the morning."

Steele also recognized the magnitude of what Peoples' employees have accomplished since the stimulus program, with the massive amount of fiber they've installed and the communications facilities they've built. While the employees remain focused on their goals, Assistant General Manager Scott Thompson said they also maintain strong connections through community outreach efforts.

"We have the personnel that will volunteer at community events, show up at the chamber banquet and put up a booth at your Saturday community event," Thompson said. "They are invested in the community."

That comes as no surprise. It's the cooperative way and the Peoples way. The telecommunications co-op delivers on its promise, doing what it always has to continue to future-proof the connections it makes. ■

Always happy to lend a hand, Peoples employees are invested and visible in the communities where they live and work.

Running Ceiling Fans Saves Energy

CEILING FANS DON'T actually cool the air in a room. They circulate the air, and anyone in the room while one is running will feel a breeze. That makes the person feel cooler.

So there's no point in running a ceiling fan in an empty room.

But a ceiling fan can make a room feel like it's up to 8 degrees cooler than a room without one. And because the fan circulates cool air, it gives the air conditioning system a break. In fact, with a ceiling fan running, you can turn your thermostat up by about 4 degrees without sacrificing comfort, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

A few tips for getting the most energy savings from ceiling fans:

► Change the direction that the fan blades spin when the weather warms up. In the summer, ceiling fans should rotate counterclockwise. That way the blades push cool air down into the room. In the winter, they should rotate clockwise so the updraft pushes warm air that is near the ceiling down into the room's occupied space. To switch rotation you have to manually flip a switch on most models.

► Hang the fan 7-9 feet above the floor. Fan blades should be at least 8 inches away from the ceiling and 18 inches from walls.

► Large ceiling fans move more air than small ones. For a large room, choose a larger fan. Likewise, large fan blades move the air around more forcefully. So if you're installing one in a home office or another room where you keep loose papers, choose one with small blades.

► Generally, the more expensive the fan, the more quietly it runs.

► Fans with an Energy Star label are about 20% more efficient than standard models. ■



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