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FROM PROBLEM TO PROSPERITY

CATASTROPHE CREATES OPPORTUNITY FOR
FIBER INTERNET ON WASHINGTON ISLAND

CHERRY RECIPES



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Catastrophic event creates opportunity for fiber fast internet on Washington Island

Washington Island's history is replete with serendipitous solutions to challenging situations. Take Prohibition, for example. When alcohol was outlawed in 1920, Tom Nelsen, who owned a dance hall and pub on the island, got a pharmaceutical license and served bitters to island patrons instead. The potent, sharp, tangy, 90 proof liquid was originally used to treat stomach ailments in soldiers. To this day, Nelsen's Hall Bitters Pub is still open for business on Washington Island, and newcomers can be added to the "Bitters Club" log after they down a shot. The novelty-turned-tradition has stood the test of time, and Washington Island is the world's single largest consumer of bitters, according to Angostura. That's what you call bittersweet.

"We've been able to partner with the folks on Washington Island to bring broadband internet here, and eventually we will have broadband at every single household that wants it. And it will change the lives of people here. It's so important, not just for health and emergencies, but businesses, and quality of life."—Governor Tony Evers

Turning lemons into lemonade, or bitters into the state's longest running bar business, is symbolic of the resiliency of the island. Located beyond the tip of the Door County peninsula, 7 miles off the mainland, the island is quaint and cultural, inhabited by 700 committed folks year-round, a population which more than doubles in the summer as people flock to the island, which is accessible only by boat, for the lavender

fields, the fiery sunsets, and the mere tranquility of it all.

"Why wouldn't you want to come to Washington Island?" Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers quipped during a recent visit there.

But maintaining, or growing, a resilient community with family-supporting jobs in an isolated area has unique challenges which require creative solutions.

Take, for example, the events of June 2018, when the unthinkable happened. The massive underwater cable that powered the island failed due to catastrophic damage from ice shoves. While Washington Island Electric Cooperative fired up generators that would run until a temporary patch was in place, the area's economic future hung in the balance.

"That was a really dark time," recalled Hoyt Purinton, owner of the Washington Island Ferry Line and Washington Island Electric Cooperative board member.

The race was on to secure emergency funding and work to replace the damaged cable before winter weather set in, and it was then that the co-op's manager, Robert Cornell, an island native, did what islanders do. He took something that was potentially devastating and found a creative solution that not only resolved the cable issue but opened the door to providing internet fiber service. Cornell identified the opportunity to bring in broadband and worked with Nsight to include 24 strands of fiber in the new underwater power cable, allowing the co-op to offer reliable, high-speed, fiber-to-home internet service to homes and businesses on the island, for the very first time.

Last October, the Washington Island School, which was the co-op's first electric customer when the island was electrified in 1945, became the first building to be connected to the fiber internet service. To date, more than 100 members are connected. Evers visited the



co-op in May, the same day the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin awarded Washington Island a \$2.5 million grant to help complete the broadband expansion project, which many believe will help diversify the economy and draw more people to the island year-round.

“We’ve been able to partner with the folks on Washington Island to bring broadband internet here, and eventually we will have broadband at every single household that wants it,” Evers said. “And it will change the lives of people here. It’s so important, not just for health and emergencies, but businesses, and quality of life.”

Board President Orion Mann recalled to Governor Evers the difficulty the island faced during the pandemic. “Suddenly you’re in a position where you are trying to teach your kids at home and you find out the internet doesn’t work on the island; it was so difficult,” he said. “The same for businesses. But thanks to Robert’s forward thinking when the cable failed, now we are innovators and leaders, and we are able to offer so many more opportunities on the island, like people starting home businesses.”

While all co-ops operate under principles including “concern for community,” Washington Island’s efforts go even beyond that. By building the fiber connection in conjunction with the cable repair, they not only restored reliable power, but are building a brighter economic future that will reach every corner of the island’s 24 square miles. The change is already happening, every single day.

“When our motel was hooked up to the fiber about six weeks ago or so, everything just changed drastically,” said Joel Gunnlaugsson, a ferry boat captain and motel owner who was born and raised on the island. “Our guests, which include contractors and other workers, are able to go out and do their work during the day and then come back and are able to do paperwork or whatever follow up they need to do, with reliable internet, where before we were so limited. We just had dial-up or DSL internet before.”

Hoyt says reliable internet has made all the difference in the ferry business.



Governor Tony Evers met with the Washington Island Electric Cooperative (WIEC) board of directors during a May visit to the island, the same day the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin awarded Washington Island a \$2.5 million grant to help complete the broadband expansion project. Evers got a tour of the cooperative, including the room housing the broadband headend operations, from WIEC Manager Robert Cornell. Photos courtesy of Office of Tony Evers

“Even on the water, the need for data is inescapable,” he said. “And before we would have three or four failovers, always at peak times while our (ferry) lines are the longest, because the county became saturated. We were literally and figuratively dead in the water. To think of how far we’ve come, from that low point four years ago when the cable failed, until now, it’s just incredible.”

Mike Gillespie is also a Washington Island native, and a teacher, who “boomeranged” back home in 2014 after completing a bachelor’s degree from Carthage College and spending several years teaching English as a second language in Beijing, China. Like many on the island, Gillespie is a multi-tasker,

joining his father in his plumbing business where they have recently added several skilled workers.

“I have seen the island grow and change so much over the past 30 years,” Gillespie said. “Recently, I’ve seen a resurgence in younger people choosing to make Washington Island their home, which is encouraging. Ours is an aging population and service workers are vital to sustaining this community. The addition of fiber optic internet service on Washington Island is already proving to be a huge benefit to business owners.”

Gillespie added that in addition to adding efficiencies to his business operations, having fiber internet will



Washington Island Electric Cooperative's broadband expansion project is key to diversifying the island's economy, nearly 95% of which is now tourism-based, and drawing more people to live here year-round, according to community leaders and business owners. Left: Washington Island Electric Cooperative Board President Orion Mann takes inventory at the island's grocery store. Center: Jan Fisco works the register at the Island Outpost, which now uses fiber internet to run point-of-sale at the register and also to provide service to people who use the dock. Right: Mike Gillespie recognizes the huge benefit of fiber optic internet service not just for business, but also online education opportunities.



Joel Gunnlaugsson captains the Arni J Richter, one of the Ferry Line's two ice breakers. Gunnlaugsson, who was born and raised on the island, says he has constant worry about the sustainability of the community where he still lives with his own family, including four kids. After high school he left the island, went to college, and landed an internship at a Green Bay company that did electrical technology for paper-making. When the economy took a downturn, he was laid off. He already had a captain's license from working the ferry before, so he went back to what he knew. But with fiber internet service available on the island, Gunnlaugsson said the future is bright.

allow his wife, Dani, to attend college full-time online this fall, and his two children, ages 8 and 4, both benefit from online education opportunities several days a week.

While they wait for their plumbing office to get connected Gillespie is actually renting a "wired" space for their plumbing business from another native islander, Steve Fisco. Fisco and his wife live in a cabin that was occupied by his grandparents in 1930s, then purchased by his parents, and later renovated by his family. He recalls the days of running to the phone booth outside of the telephone company building to make a call.

"Needless to say, now actually having fiber internet, it's an unbelievable improvement in our daily lives," Fisco said. "It's just made things possible that weren't before."

Also, according to representatives from the Door County Medical Center, improved medical services are now available, as more people take advantage of telehealth appointments, including virtual urgent care. Members are now able to communicate with health care providers at the island clinic, and at the mainland, without leaving home.

Gunnlaugsson says, quite simply, the future is bright. "Going forward this is really going to change and enhance the ability for people to work remotely or come up here for vacations and be able to bring their work with them, and hopefully some people will want to move here with their families and keep the younger generation growing and keep kids in our school. What this is really doing is keeping the island's sustainability level going."

But the price of progress can be steep sometimes. When asked if all the good that comes with an island connected could take away some of the remote charm, Cornell says, he's not worried.

"You still have to take a boat for 7 miles to get to a big-box store. I think we'll be okay," he said, smiling.

A perspective that is definitely less bitter, more sweet.—
Julie Lund

Note: Joel Gunnlaugsson also serves on the board of directors for the Washington Island Electric Cooperative, following in the footsteps of his great aunt, Anna Gunnlaugsson, an incorporating member of the board that first worked to electrify the island in 1940. Board President Orion Mann is the grandson of George Mann, also a founding member of the co-op, as well as the founder of the family General Store, which still operates on the island.