

# A2D Builds Open-Access Fiber in Warner Robins, Georgia

The mission of this competitive carrier is unusual for a private company: bridge the digital divide by building open-access, wholesale fiber-to-the-premises networks in underserved communities.

By Masha Zager / *Broadband Communities*

**A**2D Inc., an Atlanta-based CLEC and fiber network operator, just put its unique business model to the test on a large scale.

In 2005, when the company's founder and CEO, Antwon Alsobrook, launched A2D as a network engineering consulting firm, he soon realized that many fiber networks were not achieving their full potential. Municipal governments and utilities often built fiber to connect and manage their facilities without taking advantage of that fiber to improve their communities' broadband connectivity. Many of the same communities were underserved by internet service providers that had failed to upgrade their infrastructure to meet the growth in bandwidth demand.

Alsobrook began to think about how to put institutional fiber rings to better use without A2D having to become an internet

service provider. To improve broadband communitywide, these assets would have to be extended in two directions: back to a neutral internet point of presence and forward to homes and businesses that wanted service. A2D had the expertise to do both; if it invested in backhauling the fiber to a carrier hotel in a major city (or shared in the community's backhaul investment), it could then connect service providers from the carrier hotel – at the providers' expense – to any customers who wanted service from those providers.

To understand how unusual this open-access strategy is, consider some similar strategies. Like A2D, neutral operators (including some municipalities) connect customers for service providers that have no infrastructure in customers' communities. (See the story on page 52 for several examples.) Unlike A2D, however, such operators don't usually attempt to connect entire communities; the end customers involved are usually only large enterprises.

And just like A2D, some open-access network operators (usually municipalities) attempt to connect entire communities (see the article on p. 64 for information on new technology to simplify this process), but their strategy is usually exactly the opposite of A2D's. They invest in building the fiber to the premises and leave the service providers to build their own internet backhaul.

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A2D's strategy aims to make it easy for service providers to compete in underserved communities. If there is already a fiber route to the city and a fiber backbone within the city, and if customers within the city request a provider's services (and in many cases are willing to reimburse the provider for a connection to the backbone), then serving those customers with gigabit fiber is a low-risk proposition.

### **PARTNERSHIP WITH WARNER ROBINS**

In the first large-scale test of its strategy, A2D entered into a partnership with the city of Warner Robins, Georgia. A city of 76,000 located about 100 miles south of Atlanta and named for a World War II Army Air Force general, it is economically dependent on nearby Robins Air Force Base. The Air Force and its civilian contractors employ much of the workforce, and – given the highly technical nature of today's military – Warner Robins has been listed in *Wired* magazine as one of 12 small cities driving the knowledge economy.

Leveraging a special purpose local option sales tax (SPLOST), the city of Warner Robins, its development authority and A2D engaged in a strategic public-private partnership in which the city received a state-of-the-art, carrier-grade institutional network connecting its municipal facilities, the development authority and A2D with a citywide fiber backbone. A2D invested in a connection to a regional gateway in Atlanta, enabling the city and its constituents to have a superior level of connectivity.

Currently, the city's new wide area network (WAN) utilizes 28 miles of underground fiber to connect 27 city buildings and facilities. "Step one for A2D in this partnership was showing the city and the authority that we could deliver turnkey what was required in the city SPLOST. That was an obligation of the city to its constituents and therefore most critical for us," says Jerrald Rector, vice president of A2D.

The WAN was delivered early last year, and A2D has been working



An A2D vendor places infrastructure along North Houston Road to a city fire station.

with the city's IT department staff to help transition from the old network architecture and systems to the new dedicated 10 Gbps WAN. "A2D has gone above and beyond in its partnership with the city and the

authority, transitioning Warner Robins to a gigabit city," says Warner Robins Councilman Daron Lee.

Soon afterward, A2D launched its eCommunity Network, offering providers lit services from the carrier



An A2D vendor places infrastructure near Warner Robins City Hall. A new handhole was placed for extension to the city's building inspections department across the street.

hotel in Atlanta to the premises of any customers in Warner Robins. In fall 2019, with six business-focused service providers and two residential providers, A2D began an initial marketing effort, putting out door hangers along its fiber backbone route to notify homes and businesses that gigabit internet service and other services are available to them from new providers. Local businesses and residents have already responded with service orders and are awaiting connection.

More notable, however, is the impact to economic development in Warner Robins. Within the last three months, a major software company and new mixed-use developer have both decided to locate in Warner Robins. The eCommunity fiber network was a key factor in their site selection. “The R. Wayne Lowe Synergy Innovation Complex is a reality largely in part to having immediate access to the fiber

network built under the city/A2D partnership,” comments Wayne Lowe, a longtime developer and citizen of Warner Robins.

Bobby Taylor of Veterans Village of America adds, “We had several sites in Georgia to select from for our development. However, when we found out about the fiber network in Warner Robins and specifically A2D’s eCommunity network, the decision became a no-brainer. We’re taking a holistic approach to how we care for our veterans by incorporating nearly everything they would need into a mixed-use development. [We’re building] a smart community that will provide workforce education, telemedicine, distance learning and a tremendous amount of installed IoT devices, all designed to make life better for those who sacrificed for us. So, our needs go way beyond just providing good internet.”

Although connecting individual large businesses should be relatively straightforward, what Rector calls the “onesie-twosie” approach won’t make economic sense for residential customers. (That’s one reason this type of model isn’t normally used to connect entire communities.) Instead, A2D plans a modified “fiberhood” strategy: accumulating clusters of homes whose residents are interested in services, and then, when a critical mass is reached in a neighborhood, building out an entire subdivision or area of town.

## STRENGTHENING THE COMMUNITY

In the long term, A2D’s vision is to serve community members by making its network available to anchor institutions. This “community intranet” would enable even users who can’t afford retail internet services to access community-based content and programming over a fiber connection.

Such services might include telehealth, homework resources for schoolchildren, job training, community engagement, mentoring and local banking. For residents who can’t afford connectivity or internet access, connection to the intranet might be subsidized by the community anchor institutions providing these services, by local or national philanthropies or even by individuals who want to contribute to their community.

Early in the network planning process, A2D held meetings with some of the community anchor institutions in Warner Robins, which were enthusiastic about the “e-Programs.” Now that the network is live, the company is looking forward to re-engaging with these institutions and developing more detailed plans.

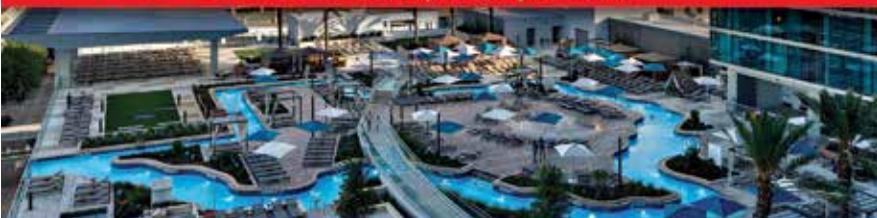
“Our mantra from the outset is to find out what we can do to eradicate the digital divide,” Rector says. “We’re trying to be a bastion of hope.” ❖

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