A2D Sets Path to Bring Digital Equity to Georgia's Clayton County

A2D, an African American-owned and operated open-access fiber provider, looks to fill in Georgia's forgotten broadband gaps.

By Sean Buckley / *Broadband Communities*

Georgia's Clayton County, a growing community that includes Hartsfield Airport, has been ignored by large providers that have not upgraded their broadband facilities to support higher speeds necessary for remote work and learning. This leaves many residents, many of whom are low- or middle-income, with slow-speed DSL or cable connections.

The lack of broadband facilities is just one problem for the county. The new federal funding from the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program is targeted to bridge broadband in *rural* areas – something Clayton County is not.

Keith Quarles Jr., CFO of African American-owned open-access competitive local exchange carrier A2D, says urban markets such as Clayton County should be included in the BEAD funding equation. "Our view is that this type of market would get missed in what's coming down the line [in terms of] all the federal funding," he says. "Everything will be designated as unserved and underserved based on the FCC maps." By that measure, Clayton County will be left out.

Keith Quarles Jr.

But people in the community are clamoring for better broadband connectivity. "You have the community and the municipality saying, 'We still have some areas where people are complaining,'" he says. "Clayton County is one of these forgotten markets where incumbents made some level of upgrades, which have been just enough to keep people calm."

A2D, through its open-access fiber platform eCommunity™, ensures every home and business can access a fiber network that all providers can use to offer services and compete.

Besides providing new internet options, eCommunity™ enables government agencies and nonprofit organizations to provide digital programs and resources directly to households otherwise unable to afford broadband internet access. A2D is rolling out fiber in Georgia, Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico.

"People realize that our model and what we're doing can help in this type of sector where it's not rural, it's not super metro," Quales says. "It's that in-between that may get lost. With our business, we can fill in the market gaps that would otherwise not receive funding or upgrades."

PRIVATE EQUITY TAKES NOTICE

A2D has attracted the attention of the private equity market. In September, Antarctica Capital, an international private equity firm, and A2D formed eCommunity Holdings, an open-access fiber infrastructure platform. Recognizing the lack of affordable, high-speed internet access in many areas, eCommunity™ is committed to bringing high-quality, gigabit fiber connectivity to underserved regions and cities nationwide.

Each eCommunity™ that A2D develops is formed locally. As a broadband utility, A2D says it aims to create a market for telecommunications services benefiting all citizens and facilitating economic development across communities. eCommunity™ is Antarctica's first investment in the fiber space and complements its existing investments spanning new length, data analytics and digital infrastructure.
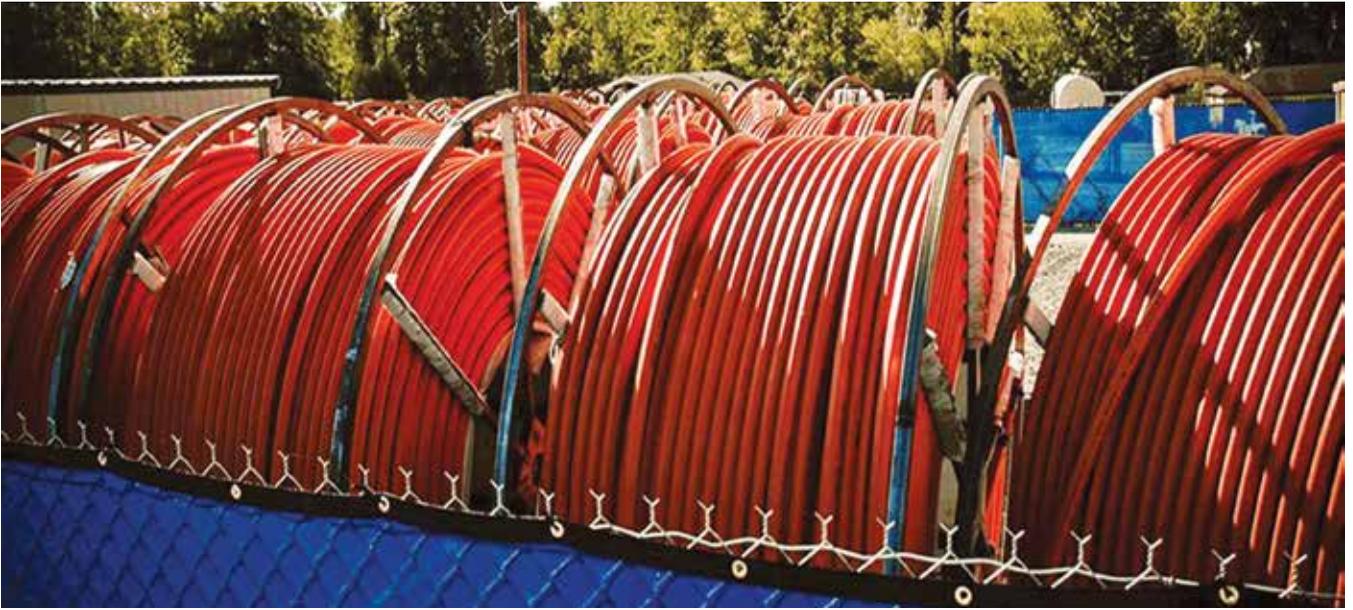
Quarles notes that traditional and new equity companies have started to pay attention to funding open-access providers such as A2D. "The historic equity groups started looking at different models [such as] ours," he says. "There have been some new entrants into the financial space and we were able to lock in Antarctica Capital, which has funded our expansion."

The new capital infusion not only gives A2D the ability to expand, but the company also gets to keep the eCommunity™ fiber brand intact.

Quarles says the pandemic may have driven investors to think about different investments. "The pandemic opened up the minds of the investors and we have to look at this thing a bit differently and loosen up the belt," he says. "They realized they needed to allow some funding to go to some new entrants."

A2D's fiber network is targeting underserved rural and urban communities.

FOCUS ON EXPANSION

One of A2D's first investments was to acquire a 100-mile backbone from Wyyerd Fiber. A2D uses a dark fiber leasing network for the local school system. This network passes through Jonesboro, Forest Park, Lovejoy, Morrow, Lake City, and suburban areas of Clayton County.

After lighting the fiber and tying it into its NOC, A2D started selling open-access services. The service provider is focused on taking it to the premises in the area.

Already, it has Master Service Agreement (MSA)s with several carriers, including Syringa, Lumen, Connect Fast, and other small providers. It also recently struck an MSA with Culture Wireless Group (CWG), an internet service provider focused on delivering internet to underserved communities.

Quarles says that A2D's model is not just about providing residential service. It can also satisfy the needs of other carriers and businesses. "Our focus is the full utilization of the open-access model," he says. "It's not just residential and not for any one sector; we cover the full gamut – small business, homes, small cell and dedicated WANs and smart city."

LIFTING FORGOTTEN MARKETS

Although Clayton County has 90,000 premises, A2D sees its market opportunity as 40,000 premises, including homes and businesses. Its 100-plus mile fiber backbone in Clayton County passes through 12 cities.

After purchasing the Clayton County fiber network in August, A2D did market research and found areas that needed more connectivity. "From our eCommunity™ portal, we assessed no fiber areas," Quarles says. "These are areas that have not seen upgrades from the local incumbent cable or telco."

Residents told A2D that the local incumbents promised that they would

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CLAYTON COUNTY FOCUSES ON DIGITAL EQUITY OPPORTUNITIES

Clayton County is tackling the digital inclusion problem head-on. In October, the Clayton County Office of Digital Equity was established to ensure that residents have equal access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet, technology and digital skills. The 2020 Census shows that 20 percent of the nearly 300,000 Clayton County residents need access to high-speed internet because it's unavailable or they can't afford it.
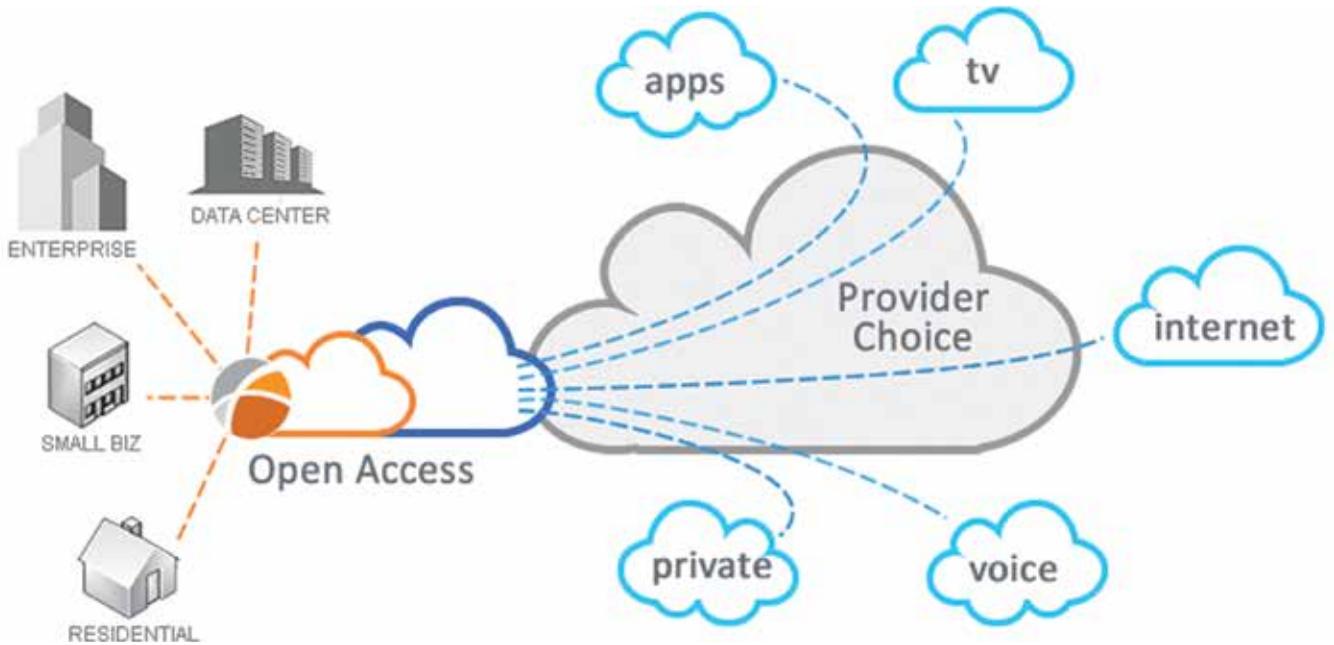
Working with county leaders, local organizations and businesses and citizens, the office has been hosting monthly Affordable Connectivity Program sign-up events and free computer classes for county residents. Clayton County earned a Top 10 national recognition (for populations 250,000–499,999) in the Center for Digital Government's 2022 Digital Counties Survey. The County's Department of Information Technology ranks 8th in the digital survey and follows the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Cybersecurity Framework.

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Each A2D eCommunity™ network incorporates the unique requirements of the community it serves.

eventually get fiber-based connectivity. "The A2D model is to come in and upgrade and have four or five others to deliver a service," Quarles says. "When you look at it as a whole, we could potentially serve 20,000 homes with fiber service, which we think will double as we expand."

He adds, "this would be a forgotten market because the local incumbent telco would say, 'We have this whole market covered, but it's not rural.'"

NEW BUSINESS, WHOLESALE OPPORTUNITIES

A2D is also finding new business services and wholesale carrier opportunities. The service provider has cited large businesses such as Chevron and others as potential customers.

Large providers such as Lumen, which has national accounts with some of these businesses, are looking to see how they can leverage A2D's connection to reach local businesses.

Although national incumbent providers have sizeable fiber networks, no single provider can reach every business. This requires service providers to purchase network-to-network interconnection (NNI) agreements with other providers.

Though fiber is undoubtedly the first choice, it's not always available; the NNI customer may have to settle for a lower-speed, copper-based T-1 circuit.

A2D wants to provide an alternative and complementary connection to other providers. "The national carriers we work with have national accounts with many businesses in Clayton County,"

Quarles says. "These providers will say, 'let me see how much it is to use your connection versus the one I am using now, and maybe I will flip them over.'"

He adds, "this goes to the sustainability of our model – not relying on one specific city or provider."

One business segment that A2D sees potential to sell its services to is the hotel industry and apartment complexes. "When we look at hotels, some rely on T-1s because there's no other option," Quarles says.

Likewise, apartment complexes can only access satellite services, but nearby places can get fiber. "We're pushing the envelope to make sure everyone gets covered," Quarles says. ✋

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