

Josh Byrnes, General Manager, took over at Osage Municipal Utilities in February of 2016. Prior coming to Osage Municipal Utilities, Josh was an Iowa State Representative in the Iowa House. Josh served three terms and during that time was the Iowa House Transportation Chairman. Josh was and is very passionate about infrastructure and championed a ten-cent fuel tax increase to help fund Iowa's aging infrastructure. That same passion for infrastructure has now shifted to broadband infrastructure and making sure all residents have equal access to connectivity. Josh also served as the Industrial Division Chair at North Iowa Area Community College for 10 years.

Josh currently serves on the CUSB Bank Board in Osage, is a member of the Iowa State Board of Education, member of the Iowa Association of Municipal Utilities Board and also a DEED Board member, which is the research branch of the American Public Power Association. Josh is very passionate about growing rural Iowa and understands that connectivity is imperative for rural America to survive.

Osage Municipal Utilities is a small municipal utility company with a big community heart and passionate employees. Osage Municipal Utilities currently has a total of 19 employees that lead the day-to-day operations of the gas, electric and telecommunications utilities. Osage Municipal Utilities is one of eight municipal utilities in Iowa who has gas, electric and telecommunications. Of our 19 employees, two are salaried and rest are hourly. The IBEW represents the hourly employees.

The telecommunications department consists of 5 employees. There is a telecommunications supervisor, two technicians and two customer service representatives. The supervisor and technicians are on call 24/7/365 and both technicians are certified in fiber splicing. Osage Municipal Utilities does own and operate its own enclosed fiber splicing trailer as well.

In 1941, the community of Osage, Iowa (pop. 3600), made the decision to start their own municipal electric utility. In 1962, the community added a municipal gas utility and in 1996 the telecommunications utility was established. Osage Municipal Utilities (Osage Municipal Utilities) is one of the most unique utilities in the state of Iowa. Osage Municipal Utilities is one of only a few municipals in Iowa who offer electric, gas and telecom services. Osage Municipal Utilities has also been a leader in energy conservation programs, has capabilities to generate 16,730kW via generation equipment, owns and maintains a 1500kW wind turbine and a 792kW community solar farm.

The mission of Osage Municipal Utilities is to provide the community with affordable, reliable employee supported electric, gas and telecommunications now and for future generations. Osage Municipal Utilities has a strong position on the now and are really focused on the future generation aspect of our business.

In our county we are witnessing the "have and have not's" of connectivity. In the community of Osage, we are bandwidth rich due to our 23-mile fiber trunk line build from the Minnesota border to Osage. You travel a mere 6 miles to south of Osage and the little town of Mitchell has a different story. The residents in and around Mitchell are scrambling to find sources of connectivity.

OMU was fortunate enough to receive a ReConnect grant in round one for the community of Mitchell who located to the north of Osage. The unfortunate situation is that by the time we were awarded the grant and allowed to let bids out for the project, the costs of construction have escalated. They have increased to the point that we do not know if we can make the project work. The grant was 100% grant with Osage Municipal Utilities also having to do a match. We have paid for the engineering of the

project and have also secured many of the materials for the project. The high costs come by the way of the installation. COVID has changed the need for connectivity and contractors are overwhelmed with work. This is not a buyer's market right now. It is my hope that we can make this project work with a combination of Osage Municipal Utilities investments, CARES Act Grant, and the USDA ReConnect Grant funds.

The proposed project is about 13 square miles, will serve a population of 300+ with 100+ households in and around the Mitchell region. The community of Mitchell is a very rural and sparsely populated community. That sparse population does not make connecting Mitchell attractive to the large investor owned telecommunication companies. The community has some geological barriers making it a difficult community to serve with a wireless system. The Cedar River would be located to the west side of the community and a trout stream runs to the north. Very scenic and beautiful area, but the bluffs and trees do not bid well for wireless access.

The goal of this project is project is to serve as many farms, residents and businesses as possible. A layout has been designed that optimizes our resources and capabilities to serve these residents.

In 2017, Osage Municipal Utilities began the process of looking for opportunities at expanding our bandwidth footprint. A solution was discovered via a new fiber trunk line to the Minnesota border. That fiber project allowed Osage Municipal Utilities to go from 1.25GB of bandwidth to 11GB of bandwidth. Osage Municipal Utilities can now offer dedicated fiber and higher speeds to internet customers in Osage. The fiber build to Mitchell will not cause any burden on our existing system due to the 2017 upgrades.

The proposed project for this grant is an easy build for our utility. The population may not be dense in rural Iowa but the build out is relatively easy due to that sparseness. There is plenty of space to work with and you are not constrained with building obstacles.

As stated earlier, we have our own splicing trailer and technicians trained to splice. This would be our fourth fiber project within the utility and this project can easily be done in 2021. Evaluators of this grant will notice that there is not anything for capitol investments on the existing system. Our headend is situated to handle this build out. There is nothing we need to do in our existing system to accommodate this growth, this could be considered a plug and play project.

The Osage Community School District is a one-to-one school district and provided each student with a laptop. The students who live in and around Mitchell are at an academic disadvantage compared to their peers who live in Osage. Never has this inequity been more prevalent than now with the current COVID-19 pandemic. As I write type this grant, our school is trying to figure out our return-to-learn plan which includes an online component. Our utility has been working with the local school district to identify students whose families are not able to afford internet and we are providing them with free connectivity to give them some sort of academic normalcy. I have received phone calls from parents in and around Mitchell if I can connect their homes so their children can do schoolwork and I have the hard task of telling them I cannot. This grant will prevent any child in the Mitchell area from ever being the have not again.

The favorite part of working on any grant is going out to the residents to acquire their support for the grant. In that process you hear their stories and see their challenges. The challenges for these residents

have only become worse with the COVID-19 pandemic. There are now more children at home and parents trying to work from home. All that extra data usage creates a strain on an already delicate system. The satellite internet is maxed out, the Verizon customers are reporting data issues and the patchwork system of wireless customers are seeing more buffering and drops than ever before. Their patchwork way of connecting is maxed out right now. The only solid solution is a hard fiber connection to their home.

As part of the USDA ReConnect grant application, I broke out my campaign shoes and went door-to-door to visit with the residents impacted by lack of connectivity. I discovered residents in and around Mitchell that are using hotspots on their cell phones, utilizing expensive satellite services with limited success, and even trying to connect to wireless systems from other areas. I had a resident, who is trying to run an online business, show me how she clips her hotspot to a window curtain for optimal signal. Another resident prepares taxes and must upload forms to the IRS in the middle of the night to avoid high use times. Wireless in Mitchell is geographically limited as they are a community on the Cedar River with dense growth of trees and river valley

During COVID-19 crisis I have had numerous adults from the Mitchell area contact me about getting them better connectivity so that they can still earn a paycheck and work from home. Again, I must tell them I unable to give them connectivity. That is a hard pill to swallow. This pandemic has really shed light on the importance of connectivity and keeping the country moving forward economically.

I understand that the USDA map is what it is and doesn't show any education centers or government centers in my proposed project. I do have a hydroelectric dam who badly needs connectivity and they are in full support of this grant.

The residents of Mitchell are our neighbors to the north and right now they are struggling as more and more daily life moves online. This has never been so profound as right now with COVID-19.

Osage Municipal Utilities has a proven track record in telecommunications and has the resources to make this project a reality with our personal investment, the CARES Act funding, and USDA funding. If I had known what I know now, I would have made my USDA grant larger. I didn't want to be the "person" who asked for too much but rather be the person who asked for what was needed. I was very low on my costs and kept things very simple and to the point. This project will be no different as we are looking at doing our own splicing, we have purchased the materials ourselves and may even use our excavation equipment to direct bury the fiber in long stretches of county roads. We are truly doing what we can to make this project work and get the residents of Mitchell connected.

In 2018, Osage Municipal Utilities was able to increase bandwidth rates to each customer in Osage with an increase in charges. Our fiber build has saved customers money and increased their speeds at the same time. This how you develop rural communities – you make it about people over profits.

One of our greatest assets as a telecommunications utility is that we are local. We are owned by the people we serve. We do not require customers to sign contracts and we have no hidden fees. Our technicians are on call 24/7/365 and live in the community they serve.

In summary, Osage Municipal Utilities has been in the internet business since 1996. Osage Municipal Utilities telecommunication utility is debt free as of December 2018. All bonds have been paid off and our telecom department has been profitable for the last couple of years. Like any telecommunications

company we have lost land line customers and witnessed the younger generation cord cutting. In fact, starting January 1, 2021, Osage Municipal Utilities has made the decision to get out of the cable business and focus on internet only. With retransmission costs soaring and subscribership falling, we are focused on the streaming aspect of video. We have created a YouTube channel called OMU University to begin helping people make the transition from cable to streaming.