



***NTTA Broadband  
Opportunities Summit  
Blackfeet Telephone  
Exchange Acquisition  
Project***

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# The Path to Better Broadband – Blackfeet Nation

This report includes:

- Background.
- Description of the Blackfeet Tribe’s acquisition project.
- Description of the assets acquired.
- Project milestones.
  - What has been accomplished to date.
  - What remains to be done.
- Conclusions.
- Questions.



# The Path to Better Broadband – Blackfeet Nation

- *“Broadband is the great infrastructure challenge of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.”*
- *“Like electricity a century ago, broadband is a foundation for economic growth, job creation, global competitiveness and a better way of life. It is enabling entire new industries and unlocking vast new possibilities for existing ones. It is changing how we educate children, deliver health care, manage energy, ensure public safety, engage government, and access, organize and disseminate knowledge.”*
  - ❖ *FCC - Connecting America - National Broadband Plan (3/16/2010)*
- *“[b]y virtually any measure, communities on tribal lands have historically had less access to telecommunications services than any other segment of the population.”*
  - ❖ *Congressional Research Service – Tribal Broadband – Status of Deployment and Federal Funding Programs (1/9/2019)*

# The Path to Better Broadband – Blackfeet Nation

- Over the past few days, we have heard about the many significant barriers Tribes must overcome to improve broadband infrastructure and the availability of broadband on their lands.
- We have heard about various options available to address these issues: Tribes partnering with the incumbent provider; building consortia with other Tribes; building wireless ISPs, etc.
- The purpose of this report is to tell the story about the Blackfeet Tribe's approach to improve broadband across its Tribal Lands.



# Conditions on the Blackfeet Tribal Lands?

- Unfortunately, like many Tribal Lands, the Blackfeet Reservation was being left on the wrong side of the digital divide.
- The lack of access to adequate telecommunications and broadband services was constraining educational opportunities, economic growth, job creation, global competitiveness, and the overall quality of life for those that live and work on the Reservation.
- As the Covid-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated, broadband Internet access is key to improving education, businesses, health care, and commerce on Tribal Lands.



# The Path to Better Broadband – Blackfeet Nation

## So how did the Blackfeet Tribe respond?

- Aggressively.
- Thoughtfully.
- Strategically.
- With Determination and an ongoing Commitment.

# Facts about the Blackfeet Reservation

Established by treaty in 1855, the Blackfeet Reservation is home to the 17,321-member Blackfeet Nation, one of the 10 largest tribes by population in the US (as of the 2010 census).

Spanning 1.5 million acres (3,000 square miles), the Blackfeet reservation is geographically one of the largest in the United States, and has a population of 10,405 residents (2010 Census).

Browning is the commerce hub on the reservation and serves as the headquarters for the Tribal government.



# The Path to Better Broadband – Blackfeet Nation

- Under the guidance of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council (BTBC), the Tribe deployed its first fixed-wireless ISP platform (700 Mhz) nearly 15 years ago and later added unlicensed spectrum systems. These systems were very successful for a number of years. However, they were costly to deploy, difficult to maintain, and eventually become outdated and incapable of keeping up with growing bandwidth demands.
- Due to a lack of investments by the incumbent telco, its infrastructure was also unable to deliver adequate broadband speeds - - and there was little indication that was going to change **(in spite of the fact that as the Eligible Telecommunications Carrier (ETC), the incumbent telco was receiving millions each year in subsidies).**
- In response, in 2018 the BTBC created the Siyeh Utility Board and Siyeh Communications (SiyCom) was chartered as a tribally-owned telecommunications utility and was granted a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity (CPCN).



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- SiyCom built a state-of-the-art Central Office facility and constructed a fiber-optic network in Browning's central business district.



- Negotiations with the incumbent were initiated by the Tribe to purchase the incumbent's Browning Exchange, which covered most of the Blackfeet Reservation. SiyCom's aggressive construction activities gave the Tribe significant leverage in those negotiations.

**By the end of 2018, an agreement was reached with the incumbent ETC for the sale and transfer of the Browning Exchange to SiyCom!**

# The Path to Better Broadband – Blackfeet Nation

SiyCom completed the purchase of the exchange on 12/31/2020. Due diligence prior to the sale (and discovery after the sale) affirmed the general lack of modern infrastructure investment by the incumbent telco.

Copper Outside Plant Located within the Community of Browning



Perhaps the most valuable “asset” acquired was the opportunity to become the **“Eligible Telecommunications Carrier”** (ETC) for the exchange, which is necessary to access millions of dollars in “Universal Service” support.

# The Path to Better Broadband – Blackfeet Nation

- The Blackfeet Tribe and SiyCom created an opportunity to acquire the Browning Exchange and pursued regulatory approvals to transfer the Browning Exchange to SiyCom (Section 214 transfer) and to become the ETC for the exchange once the acquisition was complete.
- Since SiyCom is a tribally-owned company, we were able to “by-pass” the State PSC and work directly with the FCC for our ETC designation.
- The regulatory approval process was overly lengthy (2 years) and took some unexpected turns that resulted in the FCC reducing the amount of USF support SiyCom would receive as an ETC.
- **It is essential to get in front of the FCC early and often to adequately “tell your story!” Get an experienced regulatory, technical, legal team in place.**
- We are now going back to the FCC to request that the amount of USF support be restored to its anticipated levels.



# The Path to Better Broadband – Blackfeet Nation

**So, what have we been doing for the past year since the exchange was purchased? Building a new telephone and broadband company from the ground up:**

- We have completed many regulatory tasks (FCC, NECA, USAC, etc.).
- We “staffed up” (SiyCom currently has 18 employees) and more staff is needed.
- Transitioning the operations of the Browning Exchange from the incumbent to SiyCom has been extremely complicated and has taken more than a year.
  - Switching, Transport, Signaling, Operator Services, Directory Assistance, 911, Long Distance, Numbering Resources, IP Addresses, meet points, Interconnection Agreements, IP backbone and Unified Communications (our “transition/start-up project chart” included more than 400 tasks).
- We acquired/installed/learned how to operate a new comprehensive, but complex billing and operations software system as well as other specialized management and monitoring software systems associated with our new network.
- We moved into SiyCom’s new office building and outfitted it with new computers, printers, furniture, etc.
- We acquired “tools of the trade” - service trucks (9), bucket trucks (2), backhoe, mini-excavator, skid steer, fiber plow, reel trailer, fiber splicing trailer, vactron, flatbed trailers (2), utility trailer, hand and power tools, specialized tools (splicers, locators, diagnostic tools, etc.).



# The Path to Better Broadband – Blackfeet Nation

Now that we have nearly finished the transitional and start-up tasks associated with the acquisition of the Browning exchange, what is next?

- Pursuant to SiyCom’s comprehensive engineering design (thank you Turtle Island Communications), we will soon begin to upgrade all existing copper lines to fiber (fiber-to-the-home), and will upgrade all supporting central office, transport and customer premise electronics.
  - Our estimated construction costs = approximately \$30 million.
  - The speed with which we can complete these upgrades will depend on funding.
  - We are working to understand and comply with all Tribal and BIA requirements, including:
    - The acquisition of easements and rights-of-way.
    - Engaging with the Tribe’s cultural and environmental experts.
    - Surveying issues, etc.
- SiyCom has applied for Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program funding to assist with the upgrade costs.

# CONCLUSION

- The lack of access to adequate telecommunications and broadband services has constrained economic growth, job creation, global competitiveness, and the overall quality of life for those that live and work on the Blackfeet Tribal Lands.
- The purchase of the Browning Exchange has created a unique opportunity to significantly improve telecommunications and broadband infrastructure across the Blackfeet Reservation. This will help pave the way for residents to finally enjoy and prosper from the same amazing broadband services and applications like e-commerce, telemedicine, entertainment, distance learning, e-government, etc. that are already available to others across the country.
- Improving broadband on Tribal Lands is difficult. The industry favors the incumbents, who all too often have chosen to leave tribal lands behind.
- Gaining ETC status was an essential motivation for us to purchase the exchange. ETC status will enable SiyCom to receive USF support to help cover ongoing operations costs. Without these ongoing subsidies, the business case to operate the system is extremely weak at best.

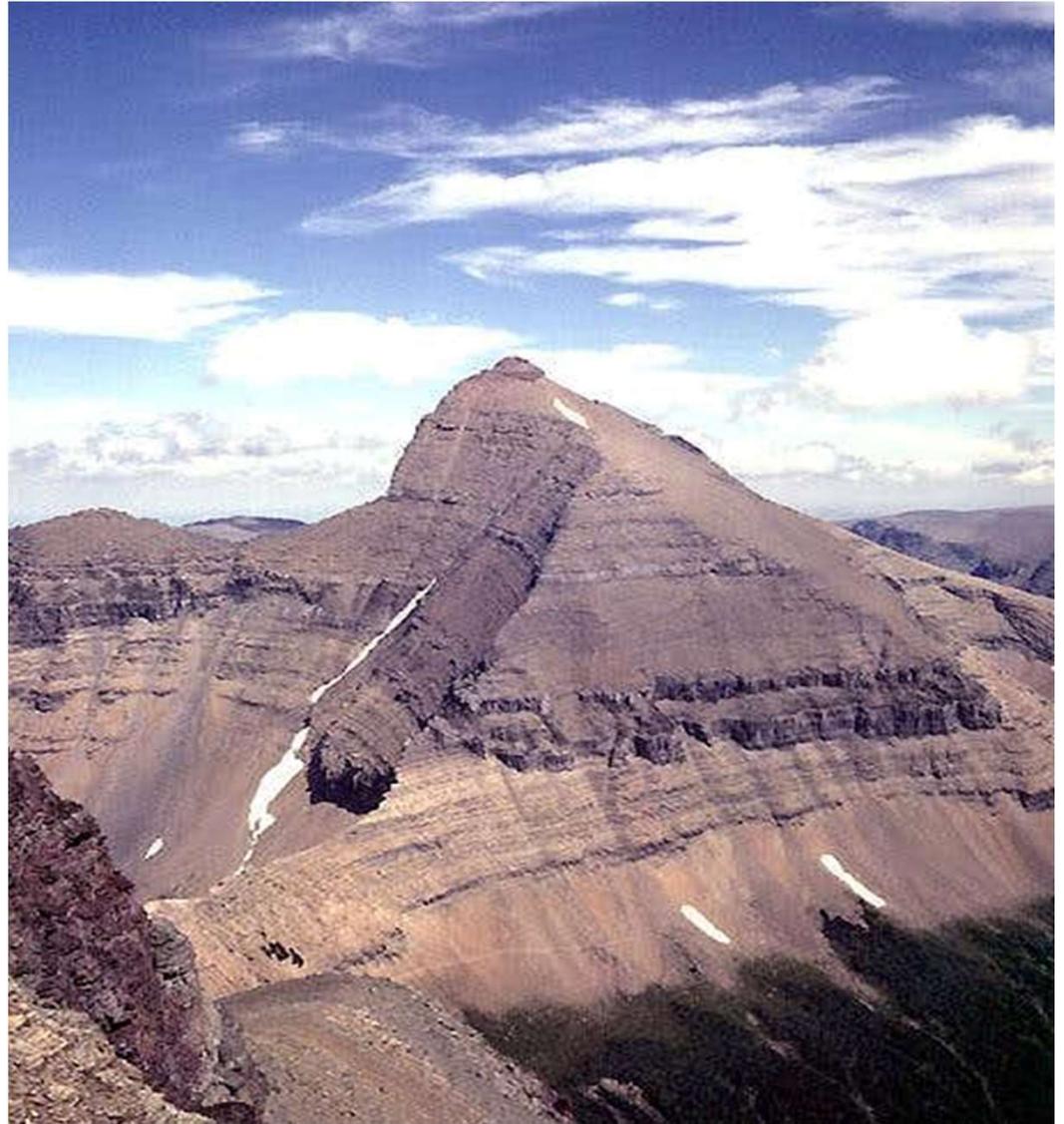


# Mount Siyeh - Glacier National Park

The mountain (and our company) was named for a legendary Blackfeet warrior who was known to be fearless, hardworking and honest.

The spirit of Siyeh, embodies:

1. Independent thinking;
2. Shouldering responsibility for the work to be done, and
3. Taking bold action.



# Questions?

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