



**AMERICAN TOWER®**

# Watch Communications Collaborates With American Tower for Fast and Cost-Effective Rural Network Expansion





# Funding Obligations Demand a Structured Approach to Network Expansion

The evolving landscape of government funding, including the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), the Connect America Fund (CAF), and other programs, is fueling investment in network service deployment to rural homes and businesses across America. These federal spending programs, like CAF I and then CAF II, provided \$10.6 billion of stimulus spending from 2012 to 2020<sup>1</sup>. In 2021, RDOF will allocate an additional \$20.4 billion of stimulus to continue bringing true broadband to rural communities<sup>2</sup>. Watch Communications is an example of a company that successfully re-imagined its rural broadband deployment strategy by leveraging these program funds and working with American Tower.

Prior to receiving funds, Watch Communications had used wireless towers to expand its network, but the vast majority of the more than 600 sites it operates are on grain elevators and other local infrastructure.

The need to extend coverage to thousands of homes and businesses across three states meant using local infrastructure was no longer practical. It would be too time consuming and difficult to find the necessary number of structures with the right elevations and adequate power and then negotiate individual contracts with each landowner. Watch Communications would not be able to efficiently meet its funding obligations or build-out deadlines with its traditional approach.

Watch Communications President and CEO Chris Daniels knew the company had to take an approach that matched the magnitude of the funding and the increased responsibilities that came with it.

“When you’re taking funding from the government on a large scale, and you’re building out hundreds of sites, you have to take a very professional and structured approach to deployments,” Daniels says. “When we started receiving funding in September 2019, we put together a plan to build out all of the locations we had to cover under our CAF Phase II obligations within four years. And, we started looking for partners that could support our plan.”

## Watch Communications At-A-Glance:

Watch Communications was founded in 1992 as a subsidiary of Benton Ridge Telephone Company. Today, the company provides wireless broadband internet, fiber internet, TV, hosting, and VoIP phone services to approximately 27,000 residential and business customers across Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio. Since mid-2019, the company has expanded its customer base by 25 percent.

<sup>1</sup>FCC, Connect America Fund, 2020

<sup>2</sup>FCC, Connect America Fund Phase II Funding by Carrier, State, and County, 2020



## Fixed Wireless Networks Deliver the Best Value for the Money in Rural Areas

Like many Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPs) and rural operators, Watch Communications combines wireless and wired solutions, and relies heavily on fixed wireless technologies, in particular.

“We’re deploying a fiber-fed fixed wireless model with fixed wireless as the primary method of reaching the customer premises and fiber on the backend for backhauling,” explains Daniels. “It’s a very cost-effective approach.”

Daniels also notes that fiber deployments don’t make economic sense in much of rural America, where there may be only one or two houses on a five-mile stretch of road. “In many rural areas, fixed wireless is a much better option than fiber,” he says. “The key is to make technology choices based on what provides the best solution for our customer at a cost that makes sense for our business. For us, that means only a small percentage of our last-mile connections are made over fiber. The majority of our customers are served using fixed wireless technologies.”

Advances in fixed wireless technologies mean Watch Communications can offer its customers broadband speeds that are more than adequate to meet their needs. “We offer services with speeds at 25, 50, even 100 Mb/s,” Daniels continues. “It really comes down to the capacity a single home or business needs for internet use, streaming video, gaming, and other activities. Sure, our customers would have more capacity with fiber, but do they need it? The answer is, typically, no.”

Additionally, Daniels explains that fixed wireless technologies are continuously accelerating. He points out that Watch Communications focuses on providing speeds up to 100 Mb/s in all new territories, and up to 1 Gb/s in areas where the company has millimeter wave spectrum licenses. The company even offers wireless connections with speeds up to 2 Gb/s over short distances in one part of its network.

Modern fixed wireless equipment also eliminates historical concerns about the reliability of fixed wireless internet connections.

“We use very high-quality fixed wireless network equipment and as long as that equipment is properly engineered and deployed, we can provide services that are just as reliable and robust as fiber connectivity,” says Daniels.



“In rural areas, fixed wireless is a much better option than fiber. The key is to make technology choices based on cost and what the technology can deliver.”

*Chris Daniels, President and CEO, Watch Communications*

# American Tower Eliminates Site Acquisition Challenges

Watch Communications had been working with American Tower since 2016, so it made sense to consider them as a partner when starting to evaluate fixed wireless expansion options.

“We have a great relationship working with American Tower and as we’re expanding our network, it was natural to consider them, especially since they have hundreds of towers to select from in the right locations and heights that fit our needs,” says Daniels. “In addition, having a portfolio of towers with heights usually 150 feet or higher grant us access to higher heights than the local infrastructure we were using, thus allowing us to reach more customers.”

To help Watch Communications quickly and easily identify the right towers for their network expansion, the American Tower team overlaid tower locations on a map of the area covered by CAF Phase II funding. They also provided information about:

- The height of each tower
- The installation heights and capacity available on each tower
- Power and fiber availability
- Jurisdictional requirements

For selected sites, American Tower also provides Architectural and Engineering (A&E), zoning, and permitting services to help minimize the administrative burden on Watch Communications.

“Watch Communications is a smaller company, so American Tower’s site acquisition services are very important for us. If we had to do all of this on our own, it would probably take three times longer,” explains Daniels.

American Tower’s ability to help Watch Communications identify new sites and obtain the required permissions is crucial to support the company’s rapid growth. The faster new sites are up and running, the faster the company can add new customers and monetize their expanded network. Within a two-year period, Watch Communications expects to expand from less than a dozen American Tower sites to more than 100.

---

“Watch Communications is a smaller company, so American Tower’s site acquisition services are very important for us. If we had to do all of this on our own, it would probably take three times longer.”

*Chris Daniels, President and CEO, Watch Communications*



## Specialized Programs Empower Smaller Operators

For Chris Daniels, the scalability, specialized programs, and flexibility American Tower can offer WISPs and rural operators are extremely important.

“If you’re working on a substantial project and you’re a smaller operator, you really need a partner like American Tower,” he says. “In my experience, the team at American Tower has the desire and ability to work very closely with smaller players and provide programs that are aggressive and fair compared to others I’ve seen.”

American Tower’s programs for WISPs and rural operators include customized pricing to ensure economies of scale for network expansion projects of all sizes, services to simplify deployments, and other measures to address the specific challenges these operators face. With the size and scope of its operations and its financial strength, American Tower also has the flexibility to build a tower where needed, or acquire the operator’s towers to help them free up cash and eliminate the time, costs, and management burdens of owning towers.

“American Tower has proven they’re willing to help the smaller operators,” says Daniels. “We consider American Tower to be our primary tower provider and a strategic partner for our wireless towers. As we pursue additional funding opportunities, such as RDOF, we’re confident American Tower will step up and do whatever is necessary to help us be successful.”

### Expand Into New Territories With American Tower

With more than 40,000 tower sites across the country, American Tower is a leader in wireless network infrastructure. They have the portfolio, expertise, and specialized programs WISPs and rural operators need to leverage fixed wireless technologies, optimize funding, and bring essential broadband services to more people in remote and underserved areas.

For more information, visit: [americantower.com/wisps](http://americantower.com/wisps)



“If you’re working on a substantial project and you’re a smaller operator, you really need a partner like American Tower.”

*Chris Daniels, President and CEO, Watch Communications*