

CONNECTIONS

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POLAR

PROMISES KEPT, EVEN IN A PANDEMIC



HOW BROADBAND PROVIDERS ARE KEEPING NORTH DAKOTA CONNECTED DURING COVID-19

Teachers using video conferencing to educate their students. Companies closing doors, their employees relying on home Internet to perform their jobs. Healthcare providers utilizing telehealth to care for their patients. All of us depending on broadband to stay in touch with our loved ones.

COVID-19 has changed the way we work, learn, and live—not just for a few months, but for the foreseeable future. And when it became clear that the pandemic would not spare our state, the 16 member organizations that compose the **Broadband Association of North Dakota (BAND)** knew that they had a responsibility: to keep customers connected.



This March, more than 700 service providers across the country, including many of our own, signed the Federal Communication Commission's

"*Keep Americans Connected*" pledge. They agreed to not terminate service to any residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay their bills, and to waive any late fees that they may incur because of economic circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic.

But BAND organizations went above and beyond the FCC's call. From laying fiber past their service territories to doubling speeds at no cost, rural broadband providers have stepped up in incredible ways to ensure that their customers have the connectivity they need to serve their communities and adapt to this new normal.

BEK + Bison Booties

Bison Booties was born out of what **Erica Hager** calls a "*happy accident*." In October 2010, the longtime hobby quilter was experiencing the universal struggle of new parents: nothing would stay on her squirmy baby's feet. With the chill of an impending **North Dakota** winter on the wind, Erica set her sewing machine and a box of scrap fabric on a folding table in her unfinished basement and got to work. After a few failed attempts, the first

pair of Bison Booties—soft-soled baby shoes that stay on even the kickiest feet—was born.

"My daughter wore them and they were great," Erica said. "I realized that maybe if I like them this much, my friends that were having babies might also like them."

Fast forward almost a decade, and Bison Booties is a thriving e-commerce business and Erica's full-time job. That unfinished basement is now her studio, where she designs and creates batches of 400 pairs at a time, selling them on a website that she has designed and maintains herself.

Erica's business ships around the world and has been featured by publications like Martha Stewart Living and Country Living Magazine. She has expanded her product offerings to include onesies, sunglasses, and adult booties. And when COVID-19 hit North Dakota this spring, she added yet another product to her inventory.

"During the pandemic, I was able to serve the community by making cloth face covers," Erica said. "It's hard to pivot a business, and it was difficult to pivot mine, but there are a few things that made it easier. One, I already sew with fabric, so that part was very natural. The second was that I had a way of quickly getting these face covers out to the people that need them."

In order to meet the rising demand for face covers and get them to her customers as quickly as possible, Erica depended on high-speed, dependable broadband from **BEK Communications Cooperative**.

"Bison Booties has been able to keep our family and our community safe, and we wouldn't be able to do it without the high-speed service that we have from BEK," Erica said. "If I had any doubt in my mind that the Internet might not work tomorrow,



or it might not be fast enough for me to upload these photos [of my products], it would have slowed that system so greatly. I don't know that it would have been worth it to make them."

Erica knows from experience the toll that poor Internet connectivity can take on an e-commerce business. In the early days of Bison

Booties, the only way Erica could access the Internet was via a satellite on the roof of her home. It was unreliable at its best, and nonexistent at its worst. Her connection would frequently time out as she tried to upload new photos to her website. When it was rainy or snowy, too hot or too cold, her Internet would go down completely, meaning she could not fill and ship orders on time. When she couldn't take it anymore, Erica called BEK.

While Erica's home was technically outside of BEK's service area, BEK CEO **Derrick Bulawa** negotiated with Erica and the two decided on a nominal fee to allow BEK to lay fiber to her home.

"It's amazing to see a lady with that kind of energy and excitement given the right access to technology, how she can just flourish," Derrick said. "She went out of her way and figured out how to manufacture these masks and sell and distribute them over the Internet to hundreds and hundreds of people. She's protecting the community, and we feel like

we're an important part of that."





DCN + Starion Bank

Just a few miles east of Bison Booties headquarters, **Starion Bank** was also grappling with how to care for their community in the midst of a pandemic.

The family-owned bank, based in Bismarck, has 16 branches and thousands of customers across North Dakota and Wisconsin. And in early March, they suddenly had more than 200 employees needing to work from home.

"We started discussing what impacts COVID might have on our business, and within the next week or so we started making decisions on closing branches, sending people home to work," said Kevin Valleroy, IT Manager and VP at Starion Bank. *"And one of the things that we recognized is that, with the number of people working from home, we could potentially need some more Internet bandwidth."*

Kevin worried that the sudden influx of teammates accessing Starion's network from home would lead to a bottleneck,

preventing them from providing their customers with the service they needed when they needed it. Starion reached out

“At DCN, our main priority is keeping our customers connected. During COVID-19, that connection has been more important than ever before.”

- Seth Arndorfer
CEO of DCN

to their broadband provider, **Dakota Carrier Network (DCN)**, to see if they could help ease the transition.

Starion Bank and DCN have a longstanding relationship rooted in collaboration and innovation. Founded in 1996, DCN is owned by 14 independent rural broadband companies (all of which are also BAND members) and was created to help support the local broadband companies and statewide enterprises. When Starion became DCN's first commercial customer in 1997, the only way the bank could communicate with its more rural branches in Oakes and Ellendale was through copper lines laid by DCN.

And as technology has evolved, so has the relationship between these two growing companies. Over the past six years, DCN and its member owners have connected every single one of Starion's 16 branches, even as far as Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, to their extensive fiber optic backbone.

As they have so many times in the past, DCN stepped up this spring to ensure that their customer, and their customer's

customers, stayed connected.

"At DCN, our main priority is keeping our customers connected," said Seth Arndorfer, CEO of DCN. "During COVID-19, that connection has been more important than ever before."

In less than a week, DCN was able to increase Starion's Internet speed from 200Mbps to 500Mbps—so that neither employees nor customers would experience congestion due to the pandemic.

"Just imagine how frustrating it would have been to be in an isolation or a quarantine environment and not have the connectivity," Seth said. "Starion's financial viability would have been impacted, their ability to service their customers would have been impacted, and the ability of their employees' students to receive a quality education during the COVID pandemic would have all been impacted very greatly."

This increase in speed has allowed Starion employees to work safely from home for the duration of the pandemic and provide their customers with the quality of service they have come to expect. Most importantly, it has given them peace of mind.

"With our COVID response, we had a lot of other things going on that we had to worry about," Kevins said. "And with DCN providing the extra bandwidth, we didn't have to worry about that. It just gives us a little bit more comfort level and security on not having issues with the number of people working from home."

Working Together – The North Dakota Way

As the COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented demand for broadband across our state, the 16 member organizations that form BAND have all stepped up in unprecedented ways to support their customers.

While there remain more questions than answers about the future of the virus, one thing remains certain. As North Dakotans, we will continue to work together to bring education to students wherever they are, support businesses as they move online, and to empower the people of North Dakota to do what they do best: innovate and collaborate.

"We've done it for centuries here in North Dakota, whether it's getting over a harsh winter, or the original farmers and ranchers that worked to form these cooperatives to install the first lines of communication across the state. That's how we got through COVID-19, is by working together."

Welcome to the New Rural. Contact your local BAND member to learn how upgrading your broadband can better your business:
www.broadbandnd.com/our-members/association-members/



68TH ANNUAL MEETING HELD VIRTUALLY



The Annual Members Meeting of Polar Communications was held at 5:00 p.m. on August 13, 2020, as a virtual event due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 153 members registered prior to the start of the business meeting.

A welcome was given by CEO Karl Blake; the Pledge of Allegiance; the invocation given by Cindy Hejl; and the introduction of current board members by President Amber Meyer.

Attorney Larry DuBois explained the election process in accordance with the company by-laws. Three directors were re-elected to Polar board of directors: Gordon Johnson (District 1), Chris Nelson (District 2), and Lori Dahl (District 3). All three directors will serve a three-year term.

President Amber Meyer and General Manager/CEO Karl Blake made a joint presentation to the members.

Secretary-Treasurer Lori Dahl reported to the members.

A recording of the meeting can be viewed online at www.polarcomm.com/annualmeeting/

“My, how things have changed over the past year! From live, in-person meetings to virtual everything. How thankful I am we have Polar bringing state-of-the-art fiber optic broadband connections to our friends and neighbors. Our year brought a record margin of \$11 million, a record capital credit payout to members of \$2 million and a \$21 million ReConnect loan/grant award to bring broadband to underserved areas of rural Walsh and Grand Forks counties. Polar was the first recipient in the nation to plow ReConnect fiber this spring.”

- Amber Meyer
Polar Board President

Three directors were re-elected to the board of directors at the Polar annual meeting.



Gordon Johnson - District 1



Chris Nelson - District 2



Lori Dahl - District 3

POLAR WELCOMES NEW EMPLOYEES

We are excited to announce the recent hiring of four new employees. Ashley Smith and Maci Schwalk started on June 2 & 3 as Customer Service Representatives. They are responsible for responding to all customer inquiries including phone, broadband, and TV services and billing questions.



Ashley Smith



Maci Schwalk



Tyler Seeba



David Dvorak

Ashley Smith is a native of Staples, Minnesota, and a recent graduate of University of Minnesota – Crookston. She received her Bachelor of Science in Business Management with a Finance minor. Ashley brings work experience from Mid-Minnesota Credit Union, University of Minnesota Crookston, and Companeros Restaurant.

Maci Schwalk is a Sales, Marketing, and Management Associate of Applied Science graduate of Northland Community and Technical College in East Grand Forks. She is a native of Milnor, North Dakota and brings years of customer service experience from Retrax Retractable Bed Covers, Gate City Bank and The Buckle.

Tyler Seeba joined Polar's accounting department on July 1. He will be working with accounts payable, inventory, and financial statements. Tyler is a recent graduate of Minnesota State University – Mankato, where he earned a degree in Finance. He grew up in Grafton, where he currently resides.

David Dvorak of Park River began his employment with Polar's construction crew on July 1. David comes with experience from the Walsh County Highway Department, North Star Coop Agronomy Center and D&L Gravel, Inc. He also serves as a volunteer on the Park River Fire Department and previously with the Park River Ambulance Service.

Welcome Ashley, Maci, Tyler & David!

STUDENTS: 2021 scholarship applications will be available at www.polarcomm.com/about-us/#scholarships in November.

Polar will be closed Monday, September 7 in observance of Labor Day



Clip this page and keep it with your Polar directory

DIRECTORY UPDATES

Alkofer Kay L 301 Hill Ave N Park River	701-284-6427	Novak Backhoe LLC Lankin	701-593-6108
Anderson Kevin L 15550 18 St SE Arthur	701-967-8318	Pedersen Willard 104 Deaconess Ct Northwood	701-587-6045
Bosh L A res Park River	701-284-6313	Sailer Robert res Arthur	701-967-8484
Brueckner Chris & Lacie 1998 49 St NE Niagara	701-397-5841	Shirek Jean F 201 D Ave W Lakota	701-247-2141
Frye Ian Christine	701-998-2545	Smith Ashley 103 Briggs Ave N Park River	701-284-6010
Ganssle Jacob & Heather 6033 Lafayette Ave Crystal	701-657-2131	Sott Julie 15960 93 St NE Drayton	701-454-3372
Harvest Moon Tavern 101 Dakota Ave E Galesburg	701-488-2763	Swanke Audrey I 102 5 St W Lakota	701-247-2894
Jones Justin 102 Garden Rd Cavalier Afs	701-993-8570	TB3 Scale House Park River	701-284-6703
Jorgensen Kurt PO Box 297 Hunter	701-874-2392	The Spa Room Northwood	701-587-1440
Krom Gary & Darlene res Fairdale	701-966-2232	Victory Free Lutheran Church Parsonage	
Lane Jeffrey T 341 N 5 St Pembina	701-825-6403	13315 Highway 17 Park River	701-284-6886
My Little Nest Egg 425 Briggs Ave S Park River	701-284-6424	Wagner Linda 206 Bjornson Dr Cavalier	701-265-3121
Northern Border Import LLC 652 Highway 59 Pembina	701-825-6444	Weis T & S 103 Code Ave S Park River	701-284-6088
Northwood Drug 10 N Main St Northwood	701-587-5271		



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CONNECTIONS

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Lori Dahl, Lakota
Cynthia Hejl, Arthur
Brian Udby, Lankin
Chris Nelson, Edinburg
James Longtin, Neche
Wes Welch, Park River
Gordon Johnson, Cavalier

Chief Executive Officer:

Karl Blake



GIG-CAPABLE PROVIDER

This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



FIBER PROJECTS UPDATE

Progress is happening with Polar’s fiber construction projects in the city of Northwood and Walsh and Grand Forks counties. We’ve installed network interface devices on over 1,200 homes and 130 miles (21%) of construction is complete.

Around September 1, information will be mailed to customers as we near installation of service. If Mother Nature stays away, we intend to continue moving forward and staying on track for installations this fall through spring.

Keep up to date with our fiber projects on our website at www.polarcomm.com/fiberprojects. If you are a customer of this project and have questions, please contact us at 701-284-7221 or customerservice@polartel.com.