

## **MINUTES**

### **BROADBAND COMMITTEE TUESDAY, AUGUST 10, 2021 6:30 p.m. ONLINE INTERACTIVE**

Committee members present: Adam Fuller, Renee Flanders, Kimberly Grindle, John Gibbons

Committee members absent: Michael Ross

Others present: none

1. Chairman Adam Fuller called the meeting to order at 6:30 P.M.
2. The members approved the minutes of the June 29<sup>th</sup> Committee meeting.
3. The first order of business was an update on the discussions with LCI regarding the potential for a complete town-wide buildout of LCI's fiber network, with connections to all premises.

LCI's engineering study report, prepared by Mark Lippold of Casco Bay Advisors, had been received a few hours before the meeting. It consisted of three spreadsheets and three graphics, with no explanatory text. The members agreed that there was no value in trying to review it in real time at the meeting, and we would all take time to review it over the next week or so, and compile our questions. We will then request a meeting with LCI to go over the report and respond to our questions.

John took the action to request a meeting with LCI as soon as we can all review the report and get our questions assembled.

There was a brief discussion of the workload facing all of the ISPs that are developing or expanding fiber networks. Renee mentioned that she had applied for fiber service connection six months ago, and it was only recently that LCI contacted her to make the arrangements. Once they got there, everything went smoothly. The problem is backlog, not service. Adam said that with the houses that he has worked on, he never had a problem with the service providers once they got there. And with the amount of broadband grant funding coming out of the federal government, the backlog is only going to get worse.

The members discussed the need to monitor emerging grant opportunities more closely. All of them are very technical and tightly constricted, and change frequently as they make their way through the Congress, ConnectME, and the new Maine Connectivity Authority. Until this point, we have been relying heavily on LCI and the Coalition for

## Broadband Committee Minutes – Tuesday, August 10, 2021

information on these opportunities, but that is not a good position for us to be in. We need to track them ourselves.

Kim mentioned that she has identified a website that provides good information on grant opportunities. She will forward the URL to all of us.

4. The next agenda item was the status of activities with the Midcoast Internet Coalition.

Mark Ouellette of Axiom Technologies, the Coalition's selected feasibility study contractor, contacted Jay Feyler a couple of weeks ago and requested a meeting to discuss the Union segment of the study. Jay and John met with him on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. Matt Siegel from the Coalition also joined the meeting. The overall study is aimed at establishing a planning basis for the proposed regional municipal network. We discussed what they were going to do and what they needed from us. They expect to have the report to us by the end of August. The meeting then moved to a more general discussion of the Coalition's objectives and current circumstances.

In Ouellette's view, OTELCO's presence is a real threat, particularly to the Coalition's financing. They've revised their entire plan around dealing with OTELCO. Siegel said that the original plan was to build first in the smaller towns, where the take rate would be very high, and then expand into the larger towns. They were disappointed to lose Hope to LCI.

The committee members had an extended discussion of the implications of the OTELCO move, and agreed completely that if OTELCO proceeds with its plan in Camden, Rockland, and Thomaston, there will be a real threat to the Coalition's ability to obtain financing for a second network in those towns. There was a general view that the Coalition always anticipated a pushback from the ISPs, but the lopsidedly favorable votes in Camden, Rockport, and Thomaston that authorized the respective Select Boards to join the nonprofit corporation that would build the regional municipal network was very encouraging, and the Rockland city council had voted the previous day to join also. OTELCO, with its funding already in place, is a more-immediate threat than the other ISPs.

The members also recognized that Union is in a similar situation. A significant expansion of LCI's network in Union, which could result from a successful grant application to ConnectME in the coming grant cycle ("Round 2") expected to open in November, would make it more difficult to obtain funding for extending a regional municipal network into Union. We'll have an important decision to make by November.

John mentioned that if we want to preserve our relationship with the Coalition pending the results of the feasibility study, the Town will be expected to have its own authorization on the November ballot. We'll need Select Board approval. The members expressed the view that it would pass easily in Union.

## Broadband Committee Minutes – Tuesday, August 10, 2021

*JEG note: Too late! Stacey says we had to have ballot initiatives and final language approved by the Selectmen not later than their August 3rd meeting. We'll have to aim at next June instead.*

### 4. Other business

The Knox County Commissioners are considering allocating a portion of the County's \$7.7M ARPA grant to the towns, and have invited the towns to submit applications. Jay has invited the Committee to submit a broadband application, in addition to several others that the Town is preparing. The applications are heavily constrained by ARPA language and the associated Treasury guidance. (The U.S. Treasury Department is administering the ARPA grant funds distribution.)

John is working on a broadband application. Possible target: defraying the cost of nonstandard connections to LCI's fiber network, which LCI passes directly to the homeowner, even for connections made under ConnectME grants. There were strong suggestions from the members that we consider broadening the language in the application to consider a wider range of connection costs, and to seek more funding than was initially discussed. John will try to respond to this in the application.

The date of the Committee's next meeting was left open, pending a response from LCI on their availability to meet.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:05 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

John Gibbons  
Secretary