

MINUTES

BROADBAND COMMITTEE

Tuesday, December 29, 2020

6:30 p.m.

Online Interactive

Committee members present: Adam Fuller, John Gibbons, Chris Norris, and Holly Savage

Others present: Jay Feyler, George Page, others unidentified

1. The meeting came to order as a Zoom session at 6:30 PM.
2. Jay Feyler provided an update on his recent contacts regarding the actions of current Internet service providers in the town, and the activities of nearby towns pursuing goals similar to ours.
3. The draft minutes of the 11/30/20 committee meeting were approved.
4. The first order of business was the status of information requests to the principal Internet service providers (ISPs) currently operating in Union: Tidewater, Spectrum, and Redzone.

Tidewater's Alan Hinsey has provided a coverage map showing the location of existing fiber runs, plus additional runs approved for near-term installation but not yet completed. The additional fiber runs include certain runs extending from the Tidewater substation in Union northward to Hope and Appleton, to support address-specific installations in those towns under the Cares Act grant that Tidewater received several months ago. Hinsey confirmed that the runs to Hope and Appleton will support additional Union subscribers along their extensions through Union. Tidewater will begin advertising this availability in Union after the first of the year.

Adam reported that he and his contact at Spectrum . . . Shelley Winchenbach, who is responsible for government interfaces . . . have missed each other in attempted telephone contacts. John will try to assist.

Coverage maps have also been requested from Redzone, showing the areas in Union that can and cannot receive the Redzone signal from its tower-mounted equipment on Cogins Hill. The requested information is being assembled.

Redzone has received a Cares Act grant to provide service to four specific locations in Union where students engaged in virtual education from home currently have slow access speeds. Under this grant, the Redzone equipment is being upgraded to support 50 mbps

download speeds, in place of the current 25 mbps. Redzone has been asked whether this higher speed will be available to other Union customers. *Late update: The higher speeds will be available to Redstone's 120 current Union subscribers after the fiber connection to the Coggins Hill site has been upgraded to provide additional capacity. The upgrade is being extended from a fiber network in Jefferson.*

4. The next agenda item was the status of communications with other municipalities engaged in broad band access upgrades. Almost all of them are much further along in the process than we are, and we seek to benefit from their experiences. Since the last committee meeting (11/30/20), there have been additional discussions with Rockport/Camden, Lincolnville, and Alna.

The discussions to date have shown that there are two basic models for extending high-speed access across the municipality:

- Subsidized build-out by the current Internet service provider, typically grant-funded and in limited (“underserved”) areas of the municipality that qualify for the grant; e.g. Alna (Tidewater), Hope/Appleton/Lincolnville (Tidewater), Union (Redzone.)

- Build-out by the municipality . . . funded by a grant, bond issue, or a combination of the two . . . resulting in a municipally-owned network that is subsequently operated by a service provider under an agreement with the municipality; e.g., Islesboro, many others; this is a common result of municipal broadband committees.

There are variations on each of these models. Baileyville and Calais, for example, have adopted the second model . . . a municipally-owned fiber network . . . and have formed a nonprofit corporation, Downeast Broadband Utility, that contracts with a service provider to provide Internet access and related services, plus user support.

As we discussed in our 11/30/20 committee meeting, the Rockport/Camden task force is looking for other nearby towns to join in its effort to develop a multi-town municipal network. We have been invited to sit in on their next meeting (via Zoom.)

5. The next agenda item was the proposed survey of Union citizens to determine current actual access speeds across the town, levels of satisfaction with current services, levels of support for higher speeds, and related factors.

The members debated proposed changes to the previously-circulated draft survey, and agreed upon certain edits to the draft. The edited survey will be circulated to the Committee for final approval.

The discussion led to the recognition that a separate survey is needed for the business community, focused on business Internet uses including eCommerce. Chris volunteered to draft the business survey, with inputs from the Committee. (We should all send our suggestions to Chris.) Holly volunteered to be the committee's point of contact with the business community.

6. The next agenda item was grant opportunities.

Until very recently, the focus of the grant issuers at Federal and State level has been the elimination of pockets of slow or nonexistent Internet service in very local areas (specific addresses) . . . so-called “unserved” or “underserved” areas, and not town-wide upgrades to overall higher speeds aimed at posturing for the future. It is unlikely that Union would qualify under this narrow focus.

There is another cycle of grant funding opening up soon, and there are indications that the previous focus may be broadening. All grants, federal and state, are channeled through the ConnectME agency in the Maine’s Department of Economic and Community Development. Chris has volunteered to be the Committee’s point of contact with ConnectME, to clarify the objectives of the next round of grant funding and to determine whether Union is likely to qualify.

7. The next agenda item was Other Business

Tidewater’s Alan Hinsey has offered to meet with the Committee to discuss opportunities for improving broadband access in association with Tidewater. The Committee agreed to invite Hinsey to participate in a Committee meeting in February. John will make the arrangements.

The Committee agreed that at least some of us should join the Rockport/Camden Task Force’s next meeting, to follow up on the Task Force’s suggestion that Union ally with the Task Force in pursuing town-wide high-speed access. John will coordinate with Debra Hall, the chair of the Task Force, and notify the Committee of the scheduled date and time. The Task Force is aware that we have just recently started, and we are not in a position to decide anytime soon on whether to join.

The Committee briefly discussed the need for more Committee members. We will continue the discussion by email.

8. The next Committee meeting was scheduled for January 26th, at 6:30 PM, via Zoom.