

## MINUTES

### **BROADBAND COMMITTEE TUESDAY, JUNE 29, 2021 6:30 p.m. ONLINE INTERACTIVE**

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

Others present: Jay Feyler, Christine Simmonds (Village Soup), others unknown

1. The meeting was convened as a Zoom session at 6:30 P.M.
2. Christine Simmonds mentioned a recent meeting of the Thomaston Selectmen at which the Coalition was discussed. The Thomaston voters had approved an interlocal agreement at the town meeting, authorizing the Selectmen to join the Coalition. At their recent meeting, the Thomaston Selectmen had agreed to participate in the Coalition's feasibility study, but had declined to act immediately on the interlocal agreement. They appeared to be looking for more information on cost, schedule, and possibly other factors expected to emerge from the feasibility study, before committing Thomaston to membership in the Coalition. Their Town Attorney had also expressed concerns about some of the wording in the interlocal agreement.

Committee members commented that Union expects to be included in the Coalition's feasibility study also, but that Union has not yet voted on the interlocal agreement. The soonest we can present the agreement to the voters in Union is the November 2021 referendum.

3. The Committee approved the draft minutes of the 6/10/21 Committee meeting, with all in favor.
4. Status with LCI

At the Committee's last meeting on June 10<sup>th</sup>, the members decided to ask Jay Feyler to commit the \$5K approved previously by the Selectmen for the Town's share of the proposed LCI engineering study to scope the task of building out LCI's network town-wide and making connections to all addresses, and to generate certain other planning information to support grant applications. LCI has since been notified of this decision. The results of the engineering study are expected by mid-July.

Adam pointed out that the engineering study results are a key milestone. This is what we need to start serious discussions with LCI about proceeding toward the Committee's objectives of town-wide high-speed access.

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In response to a question from Christine Simmonds, Adam pointed out that the \$5K for the LCI study, and an additional 5K for the Coalition's feasibility study, were both allocated from federal grant funds, and do not require tax dollars.

### 5. Status with Coalition

Following the Committee's request from the June 10<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Selectmen approved an allocation of \$5K from the Town's ARP grant to fund Union's share of the cost of the feasibility study. The Coalition has been informed that the \$5K has been approved.

The Coalition held its regular monthly meeting on June 16<sup>th</sup>, and discussed its near-term plans.

In the wake of approval of the interlocal agreement in Camden and Rockport, the Coalition is moving quickly to launch the Midcoast Internet Development Corporation (MIDC) as a legal entity which will take all further concrete actions for the Coalition. They are currently working on the bylaws.

MIDC's first action will be to contract with Axiom to conduct the feasibility study, with study results expected by the end of August. The study will produce a design for a coherent network, lay the basis for selecting the towns to be included in the Phase 1 network build, and estimate cost and schedule, plus other planning factors.

The second near-term MIDC priority, in parallel with the feasibility study, is to accelerate the search for funding to underwrite the Phase 1 build. All of the banks and other institutions that they have approached have told them that evidence of a high "take rate" . . . the number of potential subscribers who have indicated a strong likelihood of actually subscribing. . . is key to obtaining the requested financing. To this end, they are putting together a plan for obtaining evidence of a high take rate from Phase 1 towns. They are considering including in the plan a request to potential subscribers to put down a deposit, ranging from \$20 up to the first month's payment (\$60 - \$80), as convincing evidence, which will be refunded if for any reason the network does not materialize as planned. There were hints at the Coalition's June 16<sup>th</sup> meeting that the plan might be imposed on the Phase 1 towns. They expect to have the plan within two weeks, and they could begin implementation in parallel with the conduct of the feasibility study.

There was an extensive discussion among the Committee members on the implications for Union, especially the potential deposit requirement. The overall view of the Committee was that this could be a hard sell in Union, especially if we are asked to implement the plan before the feasibility study is completed. We would then be faced with asking the townspeople to commit and place a deposit without knowing the answers to even basic questions about network cost, financing, and schedule, or whether we would even be included in the Phase 1 network build.

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There seemed to be a consensus within the Committee that if the Coalition does not designate Union as a Phase 1 town, that will strongly impact our thinking about joining the Coalition

### 6. Public Outreach and Take-Rate Estimation

The Committee next discussed how to conduct an outreach to the citizens to inform them of the Committee's activities. This was a continuation of a discussion initiated at the last Committee meeting on June 10<sup>th</sup>.

There was a general consensus that the task of bringing high-speed Internet to the entire town is a complex topic, and it could not be handled easily with printed communications alone. Adam and Renee suggested that we conduct a series of public forums in the town hall, in a format that allows question and answer sessions. Other members agreed.

There was an extensive discussion of how to proceed. Key comments:

- We need to begin with an informational session, with follow-on sessions aimed at answering questions.
- We need to wait till later in the summer before starting the sessions, so that we have the results of the two studies and certain other information in our hands. It would be detrimental to our overall goal if we bring people in and find we have answers to only half their questions, and we have to tell them "We'll get back to you."
- We might want to wait till we have enough information to sort through the alternatives and we're ready to make a recommendation to the Selectmen. At that point, we'll know what the real options are, we can focus on the one that's best for Union, and we'll be able to present the facts clearly and begin to build support.
- This might also be an opportunity to get a serious estimate of the likely take rate. If we contact the citizens one by one and ask how interested they are in the proposed course of action, we still need to explain to them all the pros and cons . . . one citizen at a time. If they come to an informational hearing in the town hall, and at the end, there's a paper they can sign to indicate that they are seriously interested, that might give us a better sense of how many are likely to sign up.
- We'll need to get the word out beforehand, and ensure a good turnout.

### 7. Other Topics

The Committee addressed where we expect to be by the end of the summer. We should be careful not to assume that at that point we will be presented with two good options, with our task being to select the best one. That's not going to happen. We are far more likely to be faced either with two alternatives that both involve compromises and risks, or only one alternative that requires us to back off from our original objective of town-wide coverage with all connections.

A question was raised regarding our best course of action if it becomes apparent that we're not going to reach our objective with either LCI or the Coalition in the next few

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years. Would it make sense for us to consider working with Spectrum to expand their cable network as an interim solution?

After brief discussion, there appeared to be a consensus among the members that promoting cable in place of fiber was unlikely to be productive. Spectrum is a for-profit company, just like LCI, and has a long history of going only into high-density areas where the revenue is. We should stick with fiber as our goal, and if we're unable to meet our objectives in the near-term, we should strive at least for demonstrable progress . . . "moving the needle" . . . with fiber.

At this point, we're anticipating the following near-term actions:

- Receiving the LCI engineering study results in mid-July, and starting follow-on talks with LCI about how to move toward our objective of town-wide coverage
- Initiating discussions with LCI re the priorities for ConnectME "Round 2" grant applications in September
- Receiving from MCI their plan on how to estimate the take rate in the Phase 1 towns, and what we'll be expected to do to support that estimate
- Launch of the Coalition feasibility study by the new Midcoast Internet Development Corporation, and clarification of Union's role in the study
- Clarification of MIDC's near-term plan of action

Our next Committee meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, July 27th, as an in-person session at the Town Office in the downstairs meeting room.

***Late update: Jay has informed us that, after legal clarification, the requirement for in-person meetings does not apply to us until August 1<sup>st</sup>, so we can hold our July 27<sup>th</sup> meeting via Zoom at our option. We'll poll everybody re preferences before the meeting.***

The meeting was adjourned at 7:35 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

John Gibbons  
Secretary