

MINUTES

BROADBAND COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11, 2022

WILLIAM L. PULLEN MUNICIPAL BUILDING MEETING ROOM

ONLINE NON-INTERACTIVE AT TOWN HALL STREAMS

6:30 p.m.

Committee members present: Adam Fuller, John Gibbons, Mike Ross

Others present: Alan Hinsey, LCI

1. **Call the meeting to order:** 6:30 p.m. by Adam Fuller
2. **Upcoming Grant Opportunities:**

Alan debriefed the board on the last grant application.

It was a brand-new application process with a new metric for scoring and a new online process for folks to upload all their data and information. The idea was good, creating an apples-to-apples, more objective process. It turned out to be complicated and confusing.

Everything was due March 20. They got everything in and struggled but got some good advice. They worked with VETRO FiberMap and Tilson Technologies. After two weeks they got an email with remediation questions. They answered them and went through three different iterations. Still, their fiber map was not seen as they wanted it to be.

Adam asked if Alan got the impression there was more we could have done as a town to lean on them. Alan said no, though that never hurts; they appear wed to this process. He had a conversation with Randal Manning in preparation for coming here tonight. He encouraged the committee to reach out for more information.

John said at this point your objective is to head off any possible objections. Alan agreed, adding at end of our debrief we said great, we want to start applying, who can I work with directly at Tilson to go into making corrections, what do we need to do? They said you can't do that; we're going to wait until later in the process, later this summer.

Also in answer to John, Alan said ConnectME is another month or two months out then pretty much effectively done. It's all moving over to the Maine Connectivity Authority. ConnectME still is its own quasi-independent organization but it's being managed under MCA. Stephenie at ConnectME is kind of the main staff person there who really designed the system and wrote the instructions, and so she's now moved over – she's going to be working for MCA officially, under Executive Director Andrew Butcher. They say the next round will be October application deadline with awards made in December.

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Alan said we will reapply. Adam asked if guidelines were out. Alan guesses they will be pretty much identical; that's why they hired Tilson to come up with this template for this process. They're going to refine it and in June have some public comment meetings.

From that they'll tweak and do more instruction on it, then say now go forth and update the fiber map. They won't even commit to VETRO consulting, though they invested a lot of time and we know it's going to be VETRO. We're very comfortable, we've used them for other stuff, they're going to be the fiber map group. Tilson is still consulting behind the scenes and also kind of structuring the evaluations here. It's always raised eyebrows around the industry about Tilson, because it's a tech company – they have a consulting division that's supposed to be a firewall between that and everything else they do. The thought is they make enough money on consulting in Maine that they are not yet wanting to do infrastructure. It's a fast-growing company. Alan knows their consulting division well, respects them, and doesn't think they have a dog in this fight.

Alan said it was disheartening. Adam's personal take was they should be finding middle ground. Alan said the process seemed antiseptic and clinical. Part of what LCI brings to the table is you know us, we've completed 18 on-time successful ConnectME projects, do good work, and invest in our community.

Adam said having seen the maps, he was confused about where the lack of mapping was.

Alan said it was not the mapping itself per se. A brief discussion on addresses and layering followed. Adam felt it was splitting hairs, as the data they needed was there. John said the bottom line is we don't know. Alan showed the committee the mapping.

Alan said the trajectory now is fall, and it's a lot of money. In addition, we have the opportunity to apply for not just unserved but also anything they're calling underserved. Unserved is below 52, while underserved is up to 100 x 100. Adam said so we're attacking potentially the Spectrum area. Alan said yes. The scoring formula is different. The more we build the cheaper it's going to get. It may even get that ratio better.

Over the next two or three weeks, LCI will engage in a strategic planning process. They will do Union and will apply again this fall.

Alan said over the next three years there will be \$500 million to spend. In answer to John, he said there will be two waves of infrastructure money and additional broadband money. Every state's going to get a minimum of a hundred out of that first wave of infrastructure. Those guidelines haven't even been written yet. We don't want that to stop us.

Alan said we learned we have to invest in the detailed engineering side of it. They're using a federal model. From your engineering design for the grant, you're giving them actual price to the foot (they do give you some wiggle room).

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Adam asked if they can use the mapping and engineering they have to come up with those prices. Alan said roughly yes.

Alan noted the other thing going forward is town financial participation.

Adam asked if there was any indication of LCI appetite to do that larger project in Union. Alan said he would know in the next couple weeks. It's a matter of them moving ahead as a company and how much they can bite off. Running infrastructure is always an investment. He doesn't think that's a big problem, and we're sound in that regard. He mentioned finding workforce.

Getting to the detailed engineering was discussed. Adam asked if potentially that upfront engineering cost could be beyond what the town was looking to commit to before on this last package. He added if it were a larger sum of money, we'd have to wrap our heads around that; if in the same ballpark it's an easier issue to work around.

Alan said last time the whole project was \$917,000: half grant money, 38% LCI, 12% town so we were looking at \$85,000. He thinks it will be in that realm.

Alan added that, as antiseptic and rational and objective as they're trying to make this, it's still about people. It's still Augusta. LCI still has terrific relationships up there. They are a 60-person operation who all live and work here. The public servants, too, are not getting rich and work long hard hours.

Alan noted that while there is clearly an emphasis on the mile piece, they are also looking for interim wireless solutions which John said there are opportunities for in Union.

They discussed Mike's property on Hidden Acres and, in general, the importance of fast functional internet service.

Alan said the other thing that happened in this grant process: for scoring purposes, we went the minimum bill standard 100 x 100 with the capacity to do a gigabyte in every customer location. They said great but you don't show us the gigabyte pricing; we weren't ready to do that. It will be ready in the next couple of months. In answer to Adam, he said it would potentially be available to all customers in Union.

3. Possible new committee tasks:

John suggested publicizing once we get further along; making sure the citizens have a place to go for more information, and they understand what the preconditions are; and having an intern or other person who could work with the customer to check out the product.

Alan would have to revisit that last one, interfacing with the customer. He mentioned another thing of real value that some broadband committees have done – in Bremen,

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Hope, Appleton, and to a lesser degree Bristol – which was finding resources for the things LCI doesn't do such as excavation and installing conduits. He said for example Bremen broadband had guys with excavators who said we'll do it cheap for our neighbors; there were a couple retired guys who were electricians, and some with telecom experience. Adam thinks we have the appetite for that.

Adam asked what the committee should be doing over the next three months, such as more survey work that strengthens the application. Alan said until we get the grant settled, he doesn't think so. The work of the committee will be customer expectation, a central point for questions, and hosting public meetings where we're there and you're there answering questions.

Adam asked if, as we get closer, a public hearing would generate some buzz? Alan said yes, we had a good community support piece already. If we go forward this summer, yes.

Alan said once we get the grant then it moves into presales. How do you help us get the word out and get applications in? Even right now, that's 247 unserved locations, not signed applications ideally done online. On a good grant we're going to get 70%. Adam thinks this could go hand in hand with a public hearing: have people sign up before they leave, it takes two minutes.

Adam also brought up having people bug their state reps. Alan said no doubt that came into play last round.

Adam said if LCI gets the financial aspect figured out, if the town is committed to it, we start looking at scheduling a public hearing for late summer. Alan said good, we'll have the engineering, etc. done at that point.

John added the committee can help with managing expectations for responses to connection requests, and be a visible node of information – what the backlog looks like, what the backlog is. Adam said it's about us being in the loop so we can just be realistic with people.

Alan said as you know equipment is a nightmare. You can't get anything. They have been almost getting to two installs a day.

Adam said the committee's biggest strength is we add a legitimacy to whatever the public message is that you guys just can't buy. John added they have a certain accountability. Alan said they feel comfortable working with the committee and giving them that information. John said we are willing to take the heat when problems occur. John also asked if LCI worked with Christa Thorpe in Bremen; Alan said she was chair of the broadband committee and will get John her email. Alan added Bremen had a 75 or 80% take rate which was pretty amazing.

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Alan discussed issues of affordability and digital equity with the committee. He said the infrastructure act contains a provision for subsidies. LCI has been working with ACP (Affordable Connectivity Program) for the past several months which has a \$30 subsidy in place. The digital equity conversation included potentially different products: gigabyte, 100x20, or 50x10, but some communities think that is not fair and ask why should some be second class citizens.

Adam said realistically if you put a gig to a house, end of story.

4. Recommendations to the Select Board:

John said we need to recommend an extension of the committee's tasks. The committee decided to wait until after town meeting, when the board will have changed.

Adam said broadband is your money, your education, your business opportunities, your home valuations. John added it's your kids' lives.

5. Other business:

Alan said this is federal money now, and he thinks there will be federal strings attached to it that we didn't have before. NTIA is the National Telecommunications and Information Administration in the Department of Commerce. They are the ones managing all this infrastructure work. We have to report to them. It could add costs and delays due, for example, to something like a required NEPA review or National Historic Site review.

6. Next meeting: None.

7. Adjourn:

Meeting adjourned at 7:56 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sherry Abaldo
Secretary