

MINUTES

BROADBAND COMMITTEE

Monday, November 30, 2020

6:30 p.m.

Online Interactive

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

Others present: Jay Feyler, other unidentified

1. The meeting came to order as a Zoom session at 6:30 p.m.
2. The draft minutes of the 11/16/20 committee meeting were approved.
3. 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. The committee is seeking the following information from each provider:
 - Coverage maps for current service
 - Planned extensions
 - Actual access speeds that customers can expect to see (as distinguished from advertised maximums)
 - Conditions that can be expected to cause degradation in access speeds or reliability (e.g., network congestion)
4. John reported on his communication with Tidewater. Point of contact is Alan Hinsey, director of sales and marketing. Tidewater offers DSL plus limited fiber service in Union.
 - Hinsey confirmed that Tidewater offers DSL plans with speeds up to 10/1 mbps. There is no available 25/3 plan. (This is important if we apply for certain grants.)
 - Upon receiving our request for Tidewater's current fiber optic coverage map, listing roads and start/stop addresses where optical fiber has already been installed, he said it was difficult to provide in that form, but he would try to provide "something we could use."
 - When asked about the recently-announced U.S. Dept of Education grant that Tidewater received to provide high speed fiber optic Internet connections to 300 K-12 students and teachers in Hope, Appleton, and Lincolnville who currently have connections slower than 25/3, Hinsey said that Tidewater itself was the grant applicant, with assistance from Five-Town CSD and RSU 69.
 - When asked why Union wasn't included in the grant application, Hinsey said they needed to be able to move quickly. (No further explanation.) If there are additional DOE funding rounds, RSU 40 could be included in a subsequent grant application.
 - Committee members mentioned the fiber installation crews that have been very visible laying fiber in Union since the grant was awarded. The path to Hope and Appleton apparently runs from Tidewater's Union substation (*JEG note: its probably*

the one on Sunk Haze) across Union to the northern towns. John will ask Hinsey about whether the new fiber runs will support additional fiber connections in Union.

5. Adam reported on his attempts to open a dialog with Spectrum. His contacts in Spectrum have pointed him to Shelly Winchenbach as the best person to provide the information that we are seeking. Adam will follow up.
6. John reported on his communications with Redzone. Point of contact is Mike Forcillo, in sales and marketing. Redzone offers fixed-base wireless (radio) service in Union, from its equipment mounted on the US Cellular tower on Coggins Hill.
 - Forcillo said he has worked with more than 70 municipal broadband committees across the state. He appeared knowledgeable and cooperative.
 - Redzone offers nominal access speeds of 25/3 mbps. Actual speeds at specific location and at specific times may be lower, depending on network congestion, weather, and local conditions at the user site.
 - Redzone claims to cover 85% of Union. In response to a request for a map showing the location of the other 15 percent . . . the areas not reachable by the signal from Coggins Hill . . . Forcillo said he would ask one of his people to develop the map. But he cautioned that the map would show only sites that are unreachable due to terrain shadow (blocking of the signal from Coggins Hill by terrain between the tower-mounted equipment and the user's site.) Other sites might also have insufficient signal strength for service due to local conditions at the site, like trees. But these sites won't be shown on the map that he can provide.
 - Forcillo said that Redzone has about 120 active customers in Union.
7. The next agenda item was communications with other towns that have formed municipal broadband committees. The purpose of these communications is to determine their experiences and lessons learned, with the intent that this information might make our own activities more productive.
 - Jay issued a request on the committee's behalf for information from other municipalities, via MMA. We received responses from ten municipalities. The responses, attachments that they sent with their responses, and notes from follow-up communications, have been uploaded to a directory ("BBCs in Other Towns") on the shared Google drive that Chris set up for us.
 - Key observations from these and other sources:
 - All of the towns that have got as far as deciding on a high-speed network have opted for fiber (vs cable, satellite, or fixed-base radio.)
 - The typical activity profile appears to be:
 - a. Establish a committee to survey the town, consider options, and select an approach
 - b. Contract with an engineering consulting firm to design the network and prepare bid packages to send out to prospective network-building contractors. This consulting work is typically either town-funded or grant-funded.
 - c. Issue contracts to build out the network. This build-out is typically funded by a town bond issue, to be paid off out of Internet subscriber revenues.

- d. Select an operating model. Alternatives include: contracting with a service provider to operate the network; working out an agreement with an already-present service provider (like Tidewater) to provide service over the town-built network as an extension of its own, with appropriate price reductions to reflect the town investment; setting up a nonprofit corporation to operate the network as a public utility.
 - e. A number of the towns reported promising their citizens at the outset that the cost of access at very high speeds over the new fiber network would not exceed the price that they were currently paying for much slower access, and that this promise did a lot to build citizen support.
 - Adam said that Union citizens are likely to resist a request for early-stage funding, and suggested that we look into early teaming with a provider currently operating in Union to explore the potential for sharing startup costs. John will look into this, and will look for other towns that have pursued this approach.
 - Rockport and Camden have formed a joint committee to develop a fiber net in their towns, and are interested in having other towns join, in order to share up-front costs. We have had a similar discussion with Hope.
8. The members next addressed a survey of the town, to determine current access speeds across the town (not just advertised maximums), explore levels of satisfaction with current service, and assess demand for higher speeds. (We have not yet determined if the town will qualify for a ConnectME grant, but if we do apply, the survey is a required first step.)
- A suggestion was made to do a postal mailing of the survey to all residents, and to keep the number of questions on the survey down to around five in order to promote participation. Alternatively, we could place the survey on the Town website and maybe on Facebook. This would allow us to provide a hotlink so that the survey-respondents could determine their actual access speeds by clicking on the link.
 - The members reviewed a sample of an online survey conducted by Lincolnville, structured so that survey participants could see results of the survey as they came in, mostly in the form of pie charts.
 - The members decided to think about the survey offline and to exchange ideas by email, with the goal of having a draft that we can discuss and approve at our next meeting.
9. The members decided to meet again on Tuesday December 29th at 6:30 P.M., via Zoom. We will keep each other informed of interim developments (further contacts with ISPs, etc) by email, and we will continue to build a draft survey by email.
10. Before adjourning, the members briefly discussed the need for additional committee members. A suggestion was made that we seek a teacher, or a school board member, who can help with virtual learning needs. It was noted that grant agencies expect to see a robust committee, covering many explicit bases. John will circulate the ConnectME Grant Precertification Form that explicitly spells out what ConnectME expects to find among a committee's members.