

MINUTES

BROADBAND COMMITTEE TUESDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2021 6:30 p.m. ONLINE INTERACTIVE

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

Others present: none

1. Chairman Adam Fuller called the meeting to order at 6:35 P.M.
2. The members approved the draft minutes of the August 10th and September 14th Committee meetings.
3. The first order of business was an update on the status of the Midcoast Internet Coalition:

The Axiom feasibility study for Union still has not arrived. The Coalition's regular monthly meeting is scheduled for Oct 13th, and we expect an update at that time.

JEG note: the Axiom study report arrived on November 3rd.

The Coalition continues to concentrate on obtaining seed capital in the amount of 25% of the anticipated cost of its first build of the regional network, and is looking primarily at grant sources for the seed capital.

Rockport submitted an application to Knox County for a grant from the County's ARPA funds that would constitute seed capital for Rockport's segment of the first-build network. The commissioners met earlier today (10/12/21) to consider all of the applications. They decided against funding any broadband applications.

The towns in the first-build network have not yet been definitively specified, and depend to some extent on the sources of seed capital. The first build will likely consist of some subset of Camden, Rockland, Thomaston, and Rockport, with the surrounding (smaller) towns to be considered for a subsequent build at a later date.

The committee members expressed some frustration with the lack of cost and schedule information from the Coalition for the first couple of build sequences. This information was initially expected from the feasibility study. Our principal concern is that with the ConnectME Round 2 grant cycle expected to open in November, our window for making certain decisions as a committee is narrowing.

JEG note, 1/6/2022: the schedule for the ConnectME Round 2 grant cycle has slipped to January or February 2022.

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4. The next order of business was an update on our discussions with LCI:

Several of us met with LCI's Alan Hinsey on Sept 8th to clarify ambiguities in the LCI engineering report, and to initiate discussions of cost-sharing and other arrangements necessary for a buildout of LCI's fiber network to cover the entire town.

At the meeting, we discussed the possibility of certain accommodations from LCI in return for Union contributing to the cost of building out LCI's network.

Results of the meeting were discussed at the Sept 14th committee meeting. The key action item was to set up a follow-on meeting with LCI's Randal Manning as soon as he is available, to discuss cost and related issues.

The latest communication from Hinsey is that Randal might be available sometime after Oct 18th.

Our top priorities for the meeting with Randal are:

- * A commitment from LCI to apply for a grant from ConnectME to bring service to unserved areas of Union

- * Agreement on cost-sharing and related considerations for a complete network buildout, after the expansion funded by the grant.

5. There was an extended discussion of the reasons for the urgency in providing town-wide broadband access, and the extent to which all of the town's demographic segments . . . young, old, and in between . . . are fully aware of the growing need. There was a general consensus that we need to make demonstrable progress soon.
6. The discussion shifted to the impending meeting with Randal Manning, and what accommodations we might want to request in return for the Town contributing a portion of the cost of building out the network.

The members first recalled the following candidate accommodations, which were discussed at our last meeting:

- * Capping the cost of drops (connections from the nearest pole); the standard charge is currently \$100 for an aerial run of not more than 250 ft, but it can be significantly higher if the drop involves a long aerial run down a driveway or private road, or a run through buried conduit

- * A funding pool to subsidize drop costs for low-income residents

- * A guarantee of the availability of fiber on the poles past every address, that will support a connection ("drop") i.e., so-called FTTH (fiber to the home), as distinguished from

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transmission fiber, that carries data from one area to another but without the ability to support drops along its length.

* An agreement with LCI that if the company is ever sold, especially to one of the large ISPs, the town will have the right of first refusal to purchase the company's network and related resources in Union, or will have some other recourse to recovering its funding contribution to the network buildout.

There was an extended discussion of the last item . . . what happens to Union's investment in the network if the company is sold. The members expressed the view that this should not be a difficult item to reach agreement on. There is no cost to LCI, either upfront or at the time of sale. And if the agreement takes the alternative form of reimbursing the Town for its investment at the time that the company is sold, in place of a right of first refusal, then that is likely to make the taxpayers feel more comfortable about approving the investment in the first place.

The members discussed the potential for morphing the Broadband Committee into a different role, once the expanded network is in place. In this subsequent role, the committee could serve as a customer relations entity, or a triage unit, identifying customer service issues (like delays in responding to customer connection and other service requests, that are perceived by the customers as unreasonably long), explaining to the customers the difficulties that LCI is facing in implementing a major network expansion, and helping to organize and prioritize requests for customer support. The transformed committee could also help with publicizing to the citizens . . . perhaps through the Town's website and newsletter . . . the availability of the new broadband service, and assisting with sign-ups. All of this would help create value for LCI.

Adam suggested that our top priorities, in order of importance, are the following:

1. Commitment to submit a grant application to ConnectME at the next opportunity, for a grant to reach all of the unserved addresses in Union
2. Commitment to provide FTTH fiber (not transmission fiber) on the poles for every address
3. Some way of limiting drop costs, and the elimination of ambiguous cost elements.

JEG note: Renee said there was no charge for a router on her installation. The Tidewater website says the customer is required to lease a Tidewater-supplied router. Other sources have said that the Tidewater-supplied router is a commercially available model that can be purchased for \$130, and the Tidewater charge is \$15/month, forever.

4. Some way of providing assistance to low-income residents

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There was an extended discussion of certain ambiguities in the customer cost projections, including equipment lease requirements and bandwidth usage surcharges. There was general agreement that these ambiguities need to be clarified, and that eliminating at least some of them needed to be on our list of requested accommodations.

There was also general agreement that with Union contributing to the cost of the network buildout, there needed to be a time limit as part of the agreement for LCI to complete the expansion. It was left open as to whether this would include connections, or would be confined to stringing fiber on the poles.

The discussion returned to the role of the committee during and after the network buildout. It was reported that in conversations with Hope and Appleton regarding the role of their committees during and after the buildout in those towns, even if LCI was unable to provide rapid response to a connection request, just providing status information and rough estimates of the wait times could help a lot with customer relations, even if the wait times were long.

It was reported that if or when we go to the voters for funding to support a Town contribution to the cost of a buildout, Jay recommended that we seek line-item funding in the budget, spread over several years, rather than a bond issue. This is because under new accounting regulations, a bond issue would need to be treated as part of the Town's overall indebtedness, and would result in a higher interest rate on subsequent road bonds. Adam offered the view that line-item funding would also be more acceptable to the citizens, because there is a common reluctance among the citizens to incur further Town indebtedness.

The meeting ended with an agreement to continue to exchange ideas for the list of potential accommodations via email, pending the scheduling of a meeting with Alan Hinsey and Randal Manning to discuss the items on the list, plus the amount of a Town funding share.

7. The meeting was adjourned at 8:13 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John Gibbons
Secretary