

Select Board Sidelines

February 23, 2022

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in the Sidelines are the individual thoughts of the Select Board member.

Submitted by Bill Lombardi

Ambulance Budget: A revised ambulance budget was presented and passed by the Select Board. This budget includes increases in compensation to remain competitive with area towns. There are no additions to staff. The approved budget is a 29.5% increase from last year. Select Board members from Washington and Appleton were in attendance. Our ambulance services all three towns. There was significant discussion on this topic. Appleton discussed the possibility of changing how each town's share is calculated. This will not be fully resolved until each town votes. Of note, this is a Statewide issue that every ambulance service has to address. One of the issues impacting the cost to every ambulance budget is the low level of compensation from insurance.

Referendum Voting: Two public comments were read at the meeting requesting that the Select Board reconsider this issue. In a reversal of the vote at the previous Select Board meeting, voters will decide in June whether they wish to change to referendum voting or continue with town meetings in the future.

There was also a change in two dates related to voting. Nomination papers will now be available March 7th with a nomination paper filing deadline of April 14th.

Submitted by Adam Fuller, Select Board Chair

Broadband: To my fellow Union residents I have some exciting news regarding broadband accessibility in Union. It is especially good if you are one of the many folks in Union that currently only have phone-based DSL as an internet option at your address. After over a year of work by the broadband committee the select board voted at our last meeting based on the committee's recommendation to move forward with a Connect Maine broadband grant partnering with LCI Tidewater to build out fiber internet availability to currently unserved areas in Union. If you are one of many residents that currently does not have a high-speed internet option at your address this build out will allow for such addresses to have access to high-speed fiber internet.

The best part is that this is being done without having to spend local tax dollars. The cost of the project will be mostly covered with a Connect Maine grant, with the remaining costs split between LCI and the town. The town's portion of cost is small enough that it can be covered by funds from the American Rescue Plan Act. Each town is allocated a certain amount by size and this funding is at the discretion of the selectboard with strict guidelines as to what it may be

invested into. Broadband expansion is one of the qualifying areas of investment. This will allow the town to build out existing fiber infrastructure to improve opportunities in town for our residents at no direct cost to our taxpayers.

The broadband committee spent over a year looking into options to expand broadband in town taking deeper looks into joining the midcoast broadband coalition currently trying to get up and running, as well as partnerships with local ISPs like LCI. LCI has the most extensive high-speed network in Union currently. It was due to both LCI's existing infrastructure as well as existing installation resources as well as their willingness to commit to the town that the broad band committee found them the best fit for a partnership with the town to better the lives of our residents by providing the better financial and social benefits that high-speed broadband can bring to rural towns like ours.

This first phase of broadband expansion could begin later this year if approved and awarded by Connect Maine, with a potential 2 years for full buildout. So stay tuned, help is coming.

This build out is part of a longer-term expansion plan in Union currently being negotiated between the town and LCI for a second phase build out that would build upon this grant supported first phase. The second phase would be focused on bringing a total town wide build out of fiber infrastructure that would provide a fiber option to all addresses. The costs of a second phase would be split between the town and LCI. Negotiations are still ongoing, and prices are still being determined. So far however LCI has agreed to reimburse the town for our share if the second phase moves ahead and LCI ever decides to sell the network. This has been a key early negotiating point to protect any taxpayer investment. When we have a package with a final cost there will be more info for voters as this will require substantial costs to the town and will be a choice for the voters if we all feel it is worth the investment.

I want to thank LCI who have worked with us to get the Connect Maine grant process rolling. They currently have many towns wanting to invest and expand their broadband infrastructure. It is due to their personal ties to our community and a desire for a healthy public partnership that they have focused on making Union a priority. I hope we can build on that relationship.

Of course, I wish to thank the broadband committee members without whom we would have no progress: Renee Flanders, Kimberly Grindle, Michael Ross, and Holly Savage initially. Please let them know if you appreciate their work. And a special personal thanks to John Gibbons who has helped drive this committee and without whom I feel no offer would be on the table. These folks have worked hard to give Union residents a brighter future with opportunities for remote work and education as well as business and social opportunities.