

**Town of Mt. Desert**  
**Broadband Committee Meeting Minutes**  
**January 14, 2021 @ 4:00 pm via Zoom**

**Members Present:** Pete Cuffari, John Fehlauser, Scott McFarland, Kathy Miller, Wendell Oppewall, Lili Pew; Durlin Lunt, Matt Hart (ex officio); Kyle Avila, Jim Willis, Bob Bickmore, Steve Cornell; Kendra Jo (Island Institute guest)

**1. Approval of Minutes**

A motion was made and seconded (Lili Pew/John Fehlauser) to approve the minutes as presented for the December 2, 2020 meeting. The vote was unanimous for approval.

**2. Update from Police Chief Willis re: fiber connection from MDIHS to the Town office in NEH**

Police Chief Willis reported that the Town of Bar Harbor (BH) is making plans to connect fiber to each of its municipal buildings around that town, including the high school, and that for years he has been trying to coordinate a collaboration between our two towns to tie the internet systems together for a seamless interface, improving communications and efficiency for the two police departments. It would be adding on to the BH fiber from the high school over to the Mount Desert (MD) town office where the police department is located. He asked Bob Bickmore (IT person for MD) and Steve Cornell (IT person for BH) to expand upon the topic.

Steve Cornell noted that the current fiber lines in Bar Harbor are owned by Charter Communications and the town uses them as part of a franchise agreement. That agreement is now stalled, and BH is facing annual fees of \$45,000/year to continue using the existing fiber they now get for free. He said BH now plays a role in connecting The Maine School and Library Network (MSLN) fiber that is in use for education, and it makes sense to connect them. Federal law changes will allow Charter to take back some fees to use the dark fiber.

BH commissioned a plan/engineering study by Brian Lippold of Casco Bay Advisors, LLC to connect all the BH municipal buildings. It has been tricky to get the two town police departments to communicate as they are on two separate systems, and they want them to be as seamless as possible. Wendall Oppewall noted there are about 40-50 unused fibers running to the high school already, but Steve said that is what Charter wants to charge the town to use. Durlin Lunt said the Town of Mount Desert doesn't have a franchise agreement with Charter but do pay that same amount of \$45,000 annually to them for internet services. Steve said they would pay that amount for the use of the dark fiber alone, not for the internet services. What Steve was proposing is to connect the fiber between the two towns at the high school. Connections of services beyond that would be a matter for the two Town Managers to work out, but with the initial focus on the police communications. Right now, BH pays a small amount annually to the school and MSLN for internet services, while they provide other services related to hosting internet equipment, server room, backup, etc. back to them.

Matt asked if MD has Spectrum (Charter) dark fiber connecting town buildings, or if it's a combo of fiber-coaxial cable as any resident would have. Bob Bickmore said MD has fiber to the municipal office, and then have coax to all the branch locations. We utilize a managed VPN to connect all the sites. Wendell noted the elementary school can make fiber available to the town office, as is done in SWH. Bob noted the various municipal buildings rely on the hybrid fiber/cable for phone services, so they all need to be connected.

There was a discussion about the use of the fiber, whether it was for municipal use only, or made available to the public as private citizens/businesses. Steve noted there are two options – a municipal network or a public network. Right now, BH is proposing a public network, which would involve leasing extra strands to third parties, such as local hotel chains which may use them at their own various locations to create their own private network. Another example would be leasing to an internet service provider (ISP) who would in turn sign on subscribers from private individuals/businesses. He noted it was an expensive undertaking to construct the network, and so leasing extra fiber could help payback the investment and reduce ongoing maintenance costs. If this option is not feasible for any reason, BH could go with a municipal network, and not need to pay pole fees to either the phone or electric companies that own the poles needed to string the network. But it would be for municipal building use only. He suggested that MD could do the same, choosing between those two network options.

Jim Willis said he would like to explore if MD is interested in participating in the engineering study to see what it might cost to build out either a public or municipal network. Steve reframed that, since BH has already done their engineering study, know where all their locations are and detailed costs to go down to the high school. The question is does MD want to do a similar engineering study?

Bob Bickmore said it would make sense for MD to connect all its structures as BH is doing, not just the town office, to make a smoother path for everything, increasing sharing capacities. MD also uses a cloud hosted service for MUNIS, which BH hosts for itself. He suggested there may be an opportunity for MD's MUNIS to be held in BH, which could be a big financial savings for MD, since current total fees are \$50,000-79,000/year for cloud hosting.

Steve noted that the consultant they are working with, Casco Bay, has said that if the two towns worked together there could be cost savings for the network construction. They are budgeting \$750,000 for BH to cover all the municipal structures. No last mile, FTTH is currently planned. Bob and Lili noted the value of the network, with any potential home buyers needing to have broadband connections. Wendall said this plan of working together would be a good approach to get the network in place, which could be expanded upon later. If built correctly, fiber could be leased in the future to other entities to provide for the last mile connections. BH is anticipating enough capacity to make that possible, with 192 strands. Steve noted the cost of materials is coming down, but the construction costs/labor is increasing. However, if the network were built for municipal purposes, without pole attachment fees paid, and then expanded to public use, the pole attachment fees would return.

To recap, there were questions about tapping into the MSLN, but generally the sense that could not meet the needs of the town or other citizens as it is structured for education purposes only. The fiber for that will continue to be owned by Spectrum (Charter) and so would likely continue to be charged for its use.

MD will need to determine where it is best to run this network and what it would cost to do that. Casco Bay consulting will be at the Board of Selectmen's (BOS) meeting on Tuesday Jan 19 to present some information on this and see if MD want to connect with BH and build the network as part of the same project. The cost for the engineering study by Casco Bay to connect the high school to the MD town office on Sea Street would be \$6,000. BH has already done their engineering study and has approved the \$750,000 figure for construction to include on their Town Warrant for approval by voters. BH has been working on this for years, and they hope the public support will be there for it now. The funding for the Casco Bay engineering study is available through the Economic Development consulting budget. Ideally, if MD would join BH, it should also go into this 2021 Warrant, which should be approved by March 8. The request for engineering at this point would be to do the full municipal network, with the option for a public network.

Chief Willis asked if Matt Hart (BOS and Broadband committee ex-officio) would come to the BOS meeting to support this plan. In turn Matt asked the voting members of the committee if they would support, and all were in agreement with this proposal.

### **Island Institute and Community Engagement**

Kathy Miller provided some background on how and why we connected with the Island Institute and their involvement on broadband issues with offshore islands and coastal communities. It was noted that a community engagement process will be important to determine what the public wants or needs for services, to determine what kind of model they would support with town funding, and a necessary step to apply for any state or federal funding. Kendra Jo Grindle from the Island Institute said that the earlier discussion of connecting fiber from the high school to the town office, and needing approval at the Town Meeting, reinforces the need for community engagement. It will be important to have residents weigh in on setting some goals, not just this committee or the BOS.

John Fehlauer stated that two goals set in the past had been 1) future-proofing the infrastructure by using fiber, and 2) making sure that everyone had access to services. Wendell Oppewall noted there are some students in MD that do not have internet services at home, either because it is difficult to procure or they can't afford it. Scott McFarland said that the current remote-learning situation provides a great opportunity to get data on gaps in services. Wendell noted that across the island there are roughly 150 families that don't have service, for one reason or another. Kathy noted that beyond the student population, we need to consider the aging population who could use internet services to age in place or access healthcare, but they may need support with digital literacy as well as access. So, a broader goal might be digital inclusion or digital equity to include people at all ranges of the income or age spectrum. There

was general consensus on that goal. But accessing data through the school system would be a good starting point.

There was agreement that the high-level goals would be:

- Future-proofing the infrastructure
- Inclusivity
- Affordability

John noted that ensuring that those without service get service could be a faster process than building a whole new network. That may be another arrangement of partnering with Spectrum/Charter. But it was noted that the Vetro FiberMap information may be available to us without needing to get it from Spectrum/Charter, and we'll need that information to seek federal funding. Kendra Jo noted the Vetro mapping will provide data points on speed testing through a project the Maine Broadband Coalition has started. But she also noted there were not many data points on those speed tests for Mt Desert. She shared info on that initiative, mapping info directly from users rather than using less reliable info from service providers, and she recommended that we encourage residents to use that specific speed test to help gather mapping data. Everyone agreed they would try to encourage others to do that speed test.

Regarding timelines, Kendra Jo suggested we probably weren't in a position to seek infrastructure funding this year, but planning funding for engineering/design, etc., there could be funding rounds available in April/May, or funding from the Island Institute or Maine Community Foundation. Some planning funding could include community engagement or gap analysis. Second phase funding would be for a feasibility study, which could include engineering and design.

There was a discussion about the Tilson report that was completed in 2015, and what might have changed from that time. The process included a lot of stakeholder meetings to gather input, but since that time the cost of materials may have declined, but the need may have increased significantly, especially due to COVID. Scott wondered about having Tilson do an update, and perhaps look at any new technologies, such as Star Link. John recommended that we stay focused on fiber, while we have the next best thing with a hybrid fiber/coax, but with that we don't need to look at other DSL or other tech options. Scott raised the issue of the high cost of installing fiber everywhere, when other technologies might meet the need at a lower cost. Kendra Jo said Maine received some federal funding through the Rural Opportunity Fund, \$34 million to look at new technologies like Star Link or SpaceX for a 10-year period. It was noted that the high-end use on MDI may be available but very expensive, on the order of \$1,000/month for a gigabit connection. Pete Cuffari noted it will be challenging to tackle all these goals. Filling gaps (accessibility) by working with the current provider will be the quickest way to achieve that goal. But it would be hard to have one solution to solve all the problems. John noted not everyone will need the highest end services, but others will. So, the question is how do we meet the range of needs, future-proofing the infrastructure, and is working with the existing provider the best way to go? If it's not the best way, then what are the options?

Lili Pew noted that Spectrum/Charter is in the business of selling multiple packages for cable TV, phone or internet, while others such as GWI focus solely on internet, so that cost of service could be a bit lower. Wendell noted that Spectrum also seems to be moving toward internet services primarily. There was a discussion about the use of small cell technology as a different option from all fiber. Lili noted that in years earlier Redzone was invited to provide a proposal using small cell technology, but they didn't, so it wasn't of interest now. John stated that the wifi technology is most used when other options are not available, and it wouldn't meet the high-end need – though it might fill in gaps if Spectrum wouldn't provide service on the low-end needs. The technology of radio wave systems just won't compete with the fiber technology. And the Star Link connections are for 20/20 connections, not a huge bandwidth.

Pete asked if it might be possible for the town to do the last mile to premises if Spectrum is unwilling. Wendell said the town worked with Spectrum to help them fund the expansion into Pretty Marsh, but it would be unlikely they would want to work over town-owned fiber. Matt noted there are no longer large swaths of geography without Spectrum coverage, so for those small pockets he believed that if Spectrum could get a return on their investment for installation, they would consider building out further to expand their customer base. So, is that a role for the town to play, helping to subsidize families, or subsidize Spectrum to continue to build out? That would be the digital equity approach, to make sure everyone who needs/wants service can get basic service. John suggested that working with the incumbent provider has advantages and is likely less expensive than bringing in a new provider to expand the infrastructure, though the monthly user fees might be less with a different service.

Kendra Jo said there is always the option to continue working with the incumbent provider to fill in remaining gaps. She sees other communities doing just that. She noted St. George in particular working with Spectrum, who will pay 45% of the cost to fill in gaps, while the residents pay the balance. The town is looking at arrangements to raise funds to support that full cost. This is very different from a future-proof buildout, which would be fiber. They are not seeing incumbent provider doing all fiber where they had been using coax. For towns that believe they only want fiber, and the only way to do it is to own it and work with smaller Maine-based providers. There are some towns that have an incumbent provider that have done their own installation of fiber, and they see high turnover of residents from the incumbent to the town-owned system. She also said there could be a multi-phase approach to address gaps first and then build upon that. That approach is balancing priorities over a return on investment. If a town is going to invest in fiber, they will want to own it, and not subsidize a large private corporation. The reasons to do it would be 1) to take back some control over future connectivity for the community, 2) to be able to switch providers.

Kendra Jo offered to reach out to Tilson to see about what the scope of work would be to revisit their 2015 report. Matt suggested we remain open to working with other firms to best meet our needs.

It was noted that the VETRO Cares for Maine program will include Mt. Desert in their next round starting in February. Kathy asked for a second person from the town to participate in that effort with her. Wendell suggested either Kyle Avila (town Assessor and IT person with GIS mapping skills) or someone from the Water District who has taken some GIS courses. It was agreed there was no need to get official approval from the BOS to participate since it won't cost the town any money.

There was agreement that Matt and/or Kathy would keep the Economic Development committee informed of any progress. There was also agreement that it would be helpful to have Micki Sumpter (head of the Chamber of Commerce) join our committee.

#### **Next Steps**

- Police Chief Willis will appear before the BOS to propose Mt. Desert connects to Bar Harbor via fiber from the high school to the town office for municipal use.
- Kendra Jo will reach out to Tilson to see about an update to the 2015 study.
- Kathy will find a second person to join the second cohort VETRO FiberMap program.

#### **Future Meetings**

The next meeting will be February 11, 2021 @ 4 pm via Zoom.

Motion and second to adjourn the meeting. All approved. The meeting ended at 5:32 pm

Respectfully submitted,



Kathleen W. Miller