

Town of Mt. Desert
Broadband Committee Meeting Minutes
May 13, 2021 @ 4:00 pm via Zoom

Members Present: Pete Cuffari, John Fehlauser, Kathy Miller, Wendell Oppewall, Scott McFarland; Durlin Lunt (ex officio); Kendra Jo (Island Institute guest).

1. Approval of Minutes

A motion was made and seconded (Miller/McFarland) to approve the minutes as presented for the April 8, 2021 meeting. The vote was unanimous for approval.

2. VETRO Cares for ME update

Kathy reported on news from the VETRO program. They will do an auto-design for a full FTTH plan for the Town, assuming that no other fiber services already exist. From that design we could pare back what isn't needed. They will have some questions for us to answer, not yet provided, before they start their work. One of the details they will need to know is where to locate a central office (CO) for the network. Committee members weighed in on that point, noting it should be near where it's being fed, it could be a small, dedicated building, or be inside an existing building – better to be a municipal building. There would need to be power available, and a generator for backup power. Somesville might be a good location, as fiber would likely be coming from Rte. 102 and it's centrally located. When the other questions come in from VETRO, Kathy is to share them with the committee.

3. Community Engagement Planning with Island Institute

A small group met since the last full committee meeting to consider how community engagement might work. Kathy laid out the resulting plan for a series of meetings for an overview, with incumbent providers Spectrum and Consolidated, with state entities such as the ConnectME Authority, Nat'l Center for Digital Equity and others. It was suggested we should schedule meetings for every two weeks to keep the public engaged. It was also suggested that we meet earliest with the League of Towns to try to engage a broader regional approach, and then invite them to our future meetings. Durlin, who chairs those meetings, said the next one would be May 25, and he could add the Broadband topic to the agenda. Kathy will create a memo from the committee to the League of Towns for background info. A number of the committee members agreed they would attend. It was agreed the other meetings should be held in the evenings and begin before school ends, June 10. Kendra Jo said the people from the ConnectME Authority will be interested in a regional approach as a better fit for state or federal funding. Meeting with them in late May or early June would be good. Kendra Jo will help make connections with them. For incumbent contacts, Kendra Jo will help facilitate email introductions so we can make connections and invite to some public meetings.

High Speed Tests at schools: several schools have agreed to make a guest portal from their parking lots available for people to experience a faster internet connection. The high school could be up to 6-10 gigs/second speed. We would need to set a date for this availability.

Wendell also offered to set up a table with devices to test it out if they don't have it themselves, weather dependent. There are flexible options for scheduling, whether a single day or the whole summer. There was agreement to set it up for the first Saturday each month starting in July, for the full day, midnight-to-midnight. MDIRSS Guest is the portal to look for.

Survey Details & Logistics: Wendell provided an update on speed tests in town, but there were only about 65 locations included. There was a question about how they figure out locations with no service, and it was suggested that it may be via public sites like libraries, etc. Regarding the survey questions, Kendra Jo will send some samples from other communities. It could be both a paper and an online survey, with paper results entered into a digital form to account for everything. There was a question about the Town doing the survey, or a Google form (Wendell can offer) or Survey Monkey (Kathy can provide). It was noted that an earlier survey asked questions that weren't the best, and that whatever is used going forward should provide answers we care about and can act upon. Kendra Jo said the Island Institute has another staff person (Bria White) who is their expert on surveys, so she can run our questions by her first.

4. Consider an application for a Planning Grant

Kathy reported on the current Planning Grant opportunities from ConnectME Authority. It is a comprehensive application process, and open to the end of May. There were questions about do we need funding, how would it be spent, what's needed, when would be the right time to apply for funding, etc. Wendell suggested funding for surveys or website development might be viable. Kendra Jo noted most funders don't want to fund consultants too early in the process, but more interested in later phases for feasibility studies. They don't want to undercut the engagement of community members early on. ConnectME Authority, Maine Community Foundation and the Island Institute all provide some planning grant funding. Matching funds may be required from some, but not all sources. The Town mails out a tax bill to each property owner, and there was a question about including a survey in that mailing. Durlin said that was possible, and it should be ready to go in late June for a July mailing. It would be part of the expense for the mailing, coming from a Town committee, so additional funds are not needed. There was consensus there is no immediate need for planning grant funds at this time.

Scott suggested that the focus of the next meeting be entirely on the survey questions, after reviewing the samples provided by Kendra Jo. Kathy will gather those samples into the shared Dropbox folder for easier access.

5. Update on State proposals

Kathy reported on the recommendations from ConnectME Authority to define "broadband service" as at least 100/100 mbps, 50/10 service as unserved, and the speeds between as underserved. This is a great deal faster than the current FCC designation, and would expand local area considered un/underserved, which would help with funding. The committee made the recommendation in April, is accepting comments on the proposal. They will make a final decision in May.

Also, the Governor has made a recommendation for a larger agency to invest into broadband services around the state, beyond the current ConnectME Authority. Scott thinks this is all very positive news, viewing broadband as real infrastructure. Wendell noted a federal program suggestion to provide funding for needs-based services, similar to school lunches.

Lili Pew sent along some thoughts, though she couldn't be at the meeting. She raised the concern over access to existing poles being a major issue for time and money. She wondered about the state or some other authority putting pressure on private companies to make access easier for communities. Wendell noted in the Pretty Marsh expansion project, it was about a four-month process before Spectrum got responses from Consolidated, then it took longer to do the make ready process. Cranberry went another route and installed new poles themselves, which saved a great deal of money rather than paying the pole owners, etc. Lili also suggested that Angus King might be good to include in one of the public meetings, as someone who is a strong supporter of broadband and might have some sway over policies. And finally, she suggested we be sure to reach out to some of the smaller providers for future services, like GWI, Axiom, and Union River Communications – not just the larger incumbents Spectrum and Consolidated. Wendell agreed, noting these smaller companies are growing, and it's worth including them in the conversation.

Final question about the League of Towns agenda topic - "enhanced regional broadband and digital equity" was the consensus topic. There were some examples offered of other towns' services that were much lower cost than Spectrum.

Next Steps

- Kathy will draft a memo for the League of Towns meeting and send to Durlin.
- Durlin will send around the League of Towns agenda with a link to the meeting.
- Wendell will set up public access to very high-speed internet from the various school parking lots for the 1st Saturday of the month starting in July.
- Kendra Jo will provide connections to ConnectME and incumbents for public meetings.
- Kathy will collect the sample surveys into Dropbox and share the link.
- Everyone will review the sample surveys and come prepared to finalize the survey at the next meeting.

Future Meetings

The next meeting will be Thursday, June 10, 2021 @ 4 pm via Zoom.

Motion and second to adjourn the meeting. All approved. The meeting ended at 5:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted,



Kathleen W. Miller