

Grafton County, New Hampshire
Grafton County Broadband Committee Meeting MINUTES
Wednesday, May 26th, 2021
10:00 AM

Call to Order at 10:00 AM by Nik Coates.

ATTENDANCE: Carina Park (Town Administrator, Campton), Andrew Dorsett (Grafton County Administrator), Nik Coates (Town Administrator, Bristol), Tim Egan. A quorum was met.

Absent:

Mike Samson (Town Administrator, Canaan).

Others:

Kevin Glynn (eX²)

Katelyn Robinson (NCIC).

Members of the Public:

Bill Darcy (NH Electric Coop and Town of Benton)

John Adams (Town of Orford)

John Wright (Town of Landaff)

Alasdair Dunlap-Smith (Town of Orange)

MINUTES REVIEW

MOTION #1: Coates made a motion and Park seconded the motion to approve the meeting minutes from **4/28/2021**.

Roll Call Vote: Carina Park (Yes), Nik Coates (Yes), Andrew Dorsett (Yes). The motion passed 4-0-0.

GAPS ANALYSIS

Survey Responses

Park reported that a dozen or so communities have responded to the survey, but that more responses were needed and that the towns north of Park's district seemed to represent the largest gap (Littleton, Bethlehem, etc.) Park suggested it would be beneficial to do another push in those areas. Robinson mentioned she was meeting with the Littleton Town Manager that afternoon and would be happy to mention the survey to him. Rep. Egan added that because it's County information, he can list it in the State House calendar as well. Park will send the relevant information to Rep. Egan and the Broadband Committee, and a link to the letter of support that 12 communities have signed off on already, as well as a list of towns that have not signed yet.

RFI Summary

Coates reported he saw some responses come in from communities with maps, and some additional communities that said they want to meet ahead of time who did not provide maps. He asked the Committee if it would be beneficial to open the RFI for one more month in order to ask anyone who didn't respond to submit their maps, and if members of the Committee would be open to meeting with communities prior to map submission. Park asked that without knowing where services are provided, what would the agenda look like. Coates explained that many towns list their maps as proprietary. The Committee agreed to open the RFI for one more month. Coates will have Codling send a reminder to towns to submit their maps and then the Committee can make some decisions on who they want to talk to.

FUNDRAISING STRATEGY DISCUSSION

Katelyn Robinson of NCIC went over the NCIC grant summary with the Committee, and explained that there are about \$9 million worth of available funds. Each of these grants will have certain requirements, and NCIC will take a different angle with each one. Robinson added that the advantage of the project is that it serves an entire County, not just a single town.

CA Dorsett asked about the Tillotson program for the grant list. Robinson is going to look into eligibility and requirements further, but noted that with capital projects, Tillotson prefers to be middle-to-last dollars in, so it may be best to seek funds after additional funds have been secured for the implementation. Robinson further explained that NCIC is focusing on the initial stages of securing planning funds, because they can have as many active as you want.

Robison reported that NCIC has submitted an application through the USDA for the Rural Business Development Grant, and that they have had success with this one in the past. Although it is intended for hiring professional consultants to benefit small businesses, they make a case for planning. She anticipates they will have access to funds by August/September, and added that although the USDA grants are very competitive, there is a strong case to be made that this project serves a whole county, not just one community.

Rep. Egan added that if letters of support would be beneficial to the application process, he can secure these from the delegation and that broadband is a priority from a funding perspective for the Executive Committee. Robinson confirmed this could be helpful, and that the letters should be kept generic for the time.

Coates asked how the Committee felt about NHEC's approach to involve every community with asking for ARPA funds. Bill Darcy (NHEC, Town of Benton) explained that he does not believe it is possible to get all of the communities to pledge all of their ARPA funds to the cause, but that it is certainly worth the effort to reach out. He explained that Benton, is where he is from, and they have pledged 100% of their ARPA funds to broadband. The Town of Benton will be writing

a letter to the Governor telling him what they think a statewide design could look like for 2021, and that he is following up with four other counties to help foster this idea to get joint grant applications using ARPA and private funds for broadband.

Coates summarized that over the next 3-6 months, the Committee should focus on landing some planning grants which can be used as a match for any program they pursue. In 2022, the Committee can then apply for construction dollars. They are looking at \$25K in possible planning funds to help extend the work with eX². Robinson advised that the Committee look at the CDBG grant first for \$10K, as it could help secure another \$25K in planning funds, and that they should target county funds for later matches.

CA Dorsett put forth the idea of holding a community forum in a community that currently has no broadband, and that maybe the Committee could work with someone to bring in a temporary internet connection to operate via Zoom. This could demonstrate that while on paper, that community is a “served” area, in reality it is not. The Committee thought this was a great idea, and CA Dorsett will follow up on his efforts.

DELEGATION COMMUNICATIONS & NEXT STEPS

Rep. Egan reported that he has a meeting with Ben Belanger from the Senator Hassan’s office to talk about coordinated efforts. The Farm Bureau has an innovation fund for broadband, so he will get a conversation started with them and NCIC. Rep. Egan will also do an introductory email with Jim Monahan of Dupont Group (lobby group for telemedicine coalition) to discuss their priorities and application cycles.

Coates asked if there was a bank foundation that has some money coming up that the Committee could use as a match to CDBG. Rep. Egan explained that the idea is that when it comes to bonding, the banks would help with bonding in order to reduce the price of the bond, removing the need for an outside bonding agency. There are also downtown community wi-fi benefits for main street tourism activities (atms and fees) so that is a bank interest. There is also something called the CRA (Community Reinvestment Act) where banks have to give a certain percentage back to the community. Rep. Egan will think about how to message this for bank awareness. Coates recommended they get this together and do a one-hour community zoom with bank managers to talk about the broadband effort and ask if they would consider giving CRA funding to the project.

FURTHER FUNDING DISCUSSION:

Robinson asked what eX²’s timeline was, as the Committee was trying to determine if some funds could be pulled for a CDBG match. Kevin Glynn reported that, based on his scope, he was planning to wrap up by the end of the summer. The base mapping is set up on initial routing and competing routing data has been compiled on eX²’s end. They will take the information from the

RFI and carrier and add this to update the mapping layout, which will then take them into the high level design, where estimates have already been developed for materials and construction. All of this will formulate the selling document, and the goal is to turn this around as soon as possible. Coates did not want to pump the brakes on this effort, and the Committee discussed some alternative funding options. CA Dorsett reported that they would have to wait a few more months to determine if there was any surplus available from the County.

Park reported she has been getting a few emails from private individuals wanting to donate to Grafton County Broadband cause, and that maybe this would be a possibility, but she was not sure how they would accept the funds. CA Dorsett to check with Finance Director Julie Libby at Grafton County about these questions. Robinson said that private dollars could be leveraged, and added that there is no requirement for matched funds in this program, but it may increase their chances of getting an award.

Glynn added that material costs are going up, so it makes sense to move ahead as quickly as possible.

Coates stated that the Committee will have Robinson prepare a CDBG application with the understanding that there will be some kind of match. Park to talk to individuals about how much the Committee can get as a match in private funds. Robinson requested a timeline to help her to sort out the grant application deadlines. Glynn said he would need some additional information to determine the timeline, but should be able to come up with a schedule by next week. They are planning for a mid-Summer wrap-up, and once they have the RFI data, it will not take long to analyze. Coates recommended they report “by Labor Day” for eX²’s first phase. Glynn stated the next phase would not take longer than six months.

Robinson noted that they have \$10K to do the preliminary work with eX². If NCIC can secure funding of \$25K from CDBG by Labor Day, this would propel them through June 2022. At that point, County and USDA funds would come in. This would help round out preliminary planning and engineering designs, so in that in the Spring, NCIC can start going after implementation funds.

Bill Darcy noted that if the State of NH issues an RFP for \$2 million of ARPA funds on July 1st, everyone’s timelines will dramatically change.

TECHNICAL SERVICES UPDATES & NEXT STEPS

Glynn reported that eX² has begun the mapping, and once they start to get data from the RFI, they will use that to finalize a better layout. He received competing data through the services eX² uses nationally. eX² will also be laying out a one-page marketing piece once they have some more information, and doing a business review piece after their discussion with Michael Samson.

Coates requested that for the next meeting, they send a map ahead of time and provide further comments at the meeting. He will also remind Michael Samson to get in touch with about the business map.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

- **John Adams** reported that the Town of Orford supports a warrant article to support their process. Orford has a broadband committee locally that's very enthusiastic. Adams expressed that they need to be careful about federal money going to the county and make sure towns are aware they will need money to do the second portion off the backbone implementation. They were able to have a booth set up at the town meeting, and put some information about Broadband in the paper as well.
- **Alasdair Dunlap-Smith** from the Town of Orange made another push for more survey responses and offered to do another one if needed.
- **John Wright** stated that the Town of Landaff has less than 250 homes and the only business is logging, so they are concerned about the last mile and how they are going to fund it. The board passed the warrant article to move forward, but there has been no funding, and he would love to work with whoever he needs to to ensure they can get funding.

OTHER BUSINESS

Park recommended that for communities who have signed the letter of support, the Committee sends a follow-up document to encourage their local representation to support reserving some ARPA funds for broadband effort, and will draft a document. CA Dorsett recommended that in this letter, they encourage towns to use ARPA funds, and also include Kevin Glynn as a contact for their design buildout. Robinson added that communities and towns could pursue USDA grants for last mile and even have some consulting funds to allow NCIC to do the grant writing. This could be on a regional basis or town-by-town, but is something to keep in mind for the last phase.

Coates suggested they send a letter out and then at the next meeting, do a one hour work session on how they can work together on the backbone and the distribution to the community, and how to provide resources and communication.

NEXT MEETING: June 23rd, 2021, at 10:00 AM

Hour 1: Project Updates, Hour 2: Work Session about Communities, How to Get Everyone Involved, and not duplicate efforts.

MOTION #2: CA Dorsett made a motion to adjourn, and Park seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote: Carina Park (Yes), Nik Coates (Yes), Andrew Dorsett (Yes). The motion passed 4-0-0/

The meeting ADJOURNED at 12:16 PM.