



MARATHON COUNTY BROADBAND TASK FORCE MEETING MINUTES

Monday, August 23, 2021 at 4:00 P.M.

WebEx/Courthouse Assembly Room, B-105, 500 Forest Street, Wausau WI

Members	Present/Web-Phone	Absent
Chair John Robinson	X	
Sandi Cihlar	W	
Jon Euting	W	
Sara Guild	W	
Jacob Langenhahn	P	
Milton Olson	W	
Kurt Schoenrock		X

Also Present: Gerald Klein, and Toshia Ranallo

VIA Web or Phone: Kurt Gibbs, Randy Fifrlick, Jonathan Fischer, Jason Hausler, Jean Maszk, Steve Schneider, Mitch Olson, Valerie Carrillo, Sarah Dowidat, Eric Budleski, Melinda Osterberg, Scott Nyman, Bill Flood.

1. Call Meeting to Order:
Chair Robinson called the meeting to order at 4:00 p.m.
2. Public Comments (15 Minute limit) - None
3. **CIHLAR MADE A MOTION; SECOND BY OLSON TO APPROVE THE JULY 7, 2021 BROADBAND TASK FORCE MEETING MINUTES. MOTION CARRIED.**
4. Educational Presentations and Committee Discussion:
 - A. Update on Grant Applications For the Wisconsin PSC's American Rescue Act Broadband Access Grant

Discussion:

Chair Robinson reported WI legislation allocated \$100 million for American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Broadband Access Grants. There were 241 applications submitted to the WI Public Service Commission (PSC) totaling \$438 million in requests for fiscal year 2022. Applications were due on July 27, 2021 and a response is anticipated later this fall. Bug Tussel, Country Wireless, Charter Communications, and Frontier submitted applications for projects in Marathon County. Project areas include the Towns of Texas and Hamburg, Marshfield area, and areas from Rothschild to Lincoln County.

In March, Wittenberg Telephone Company was awarded a \$172,872 WI PSC grant for broadband expansion in Marathon County. This project will build a Fiber-To-The-Premises (FTTP) service past 3 businesses and 85 residences along County Road Y south of the City of Hatley, west along Townline Road, and south along County Road Q, in the Towns of Reid and Ringle.

- B. Update on Marathon County/Charter application to NTIA

Discussion:

In partnership with Charter Communications, Marathon County applied for a National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) grant on August 17th for broadband expansion in the eastern and central areas of the county. The proposal is to connect over 2000 residents stretching 551.9 miles of fiber. A response is expected by the end of November.

- C. Potential Federal and State Funding Sources For Broadband Expansion and Affordability

Discussion:

Chair Robinson identified the following funding sources for broadband expansion:

- \$125,000,000 allocated in the state budget
- \$65 billion in the Federal Infrastructure Bill (includes money for grant programs)
- \$50 billion in the Rural Infrastructure Program allocated for infrastructure investments

- \$100 million allocated for WI PSC grants authorized by ARPA funds
- Connecting Minorities Communities Grant (needs to be looked into)
- U. S. Department of Agriculture continues to manage Utility Service Grants
- \$26.3 million ARPA dollars allocated to Marathon County. The HR Property & Finance Committee is in the process of developing criteria on how these funds will be used.
- ARPA funds allocated to other local units of government in the county

5. Policy Discussion And Possible Action:

A. Bug Tussel Conduit Bonding Proposal

Discussion:

Chair Robinson explained Bug Tussel submitted a PSC grant application to construct a series of towers and to run fiber throughout the county. They propose using industrial revenue bonds for funding partnering with Marathon, Fond Du Lac, and other interested counties. A memorandum of agreement would be arranged to pay back the principal and interest. An initial resolution will be presented to the County Board in September to fund up to \$25 million for improvements and broadband expansion efforts. In exchange for conduit bonding, they would give the county 40 basis points and/or a percent on any outstanding balance plus give 24 fibers to the county for governmental use.

This will be an item for discussion and presented to the upcoming HR Property & Finance Committee meetings and potentially forwarded to the full county board on September 21, 2021. The initial resolution and legal documents are being reviewed by corporation counsel and the county's financial advisor.

Action:

MOTION BY GUILD; SECOND BY CIHLAR; TO MOVE TO APPROVE THE CONDUIT BONDING PROPOSAL AND FORWARD THAT RECOMMENDATION TO THE APPROPRIATE COMMITTEE. MOTION CARRIED.

Follow up:

The proposal will be presented to associated standing committees over the next month.

B. Marathon County's Future Role As A Fiscal Partner For Broadband Expansion

1. Define Role of County
 - Taking the lead role with outreach and education on getting broadband throughout the county with utilizing a potential UW Extension position shared between Lincoln and Marathon County. This position is currently being evaluated by the EEEDC
 - Meeting with ISPs
 - Creating RFP's
 - Meeting grant commitments
 - Do not want the county to be only a facilitator, but a partner as well. We need to stay in the conversations.
2. Commitments: Financial or other
 - a) Potential use of ARPA funds
 - Provide the last mile
 - Cover administrative costs for administering programs including local governments entering into a potential regional project
3. Expectations of Internet Service Providers/Partners
 - If the county partners with an ISP we need to know where their current services are located and this information is made public.
 - Should local units of governments be expected to match or contribute a percentage toward broadband expansion within their boundaries?
4. Partnerships to extend service too hard to reach areas
5. Staff support for broadband expansion efforts

- Consensus of the task force is to hire someone on the county payroll to assist and be dedicated to broadband expansion, education, and facilitation as far as grant applications.
- Think about a contracted or internal employee for a limited time, but don't want a position where their hands are tied to what they can and cannot do.
- Internal position would be seamless in communication.
- Visual outlining current opportunities and what the position would look like. This good be done at a Standing Committee level.
- Must have the skill set to assist in writing grants applications, communications, education, technology and technical skills

Action:

MOTION BY MILTON; SECOND BY LANGENHAHN TO MOVE THE DISCUSSION OF STAFF SUPPORT FOR BROADBAND EXPANSION EFFORTS TO THE APPROPORATE COMMITTEE TO BRING FORWARD A PLAN TO THE BROADBAND TASK FORCE FOR APPROVAL. MOTION CARRIED.

Follow up:

- C. Review of Marathon County Broadband Survey and Distribution Plan

Discussion:

Melinda Osterberg gave an overview on a survey she created for Lincoln County tailored to receive granular data to be used for tasks and to assist in writing future grant applications. A postcard was mailed to every address with an improved value over \$50,000. The postcard directed them to an online survey. Residents could also request a paper copy be sent to them or the survey was available for pick up at the UW Extension Office and various libraries.

The survey took a significant amount of staff time and the task force needs to discuss the best way to disseminate and compile their own survey results.

Jason Hausler offered administrative support from the UW Extension Office. They have access to the survey instrument and can assist in downloading information. However, the point of contact and who will create the postcard will need to be determined.

The Task Force also discussed contacting GEO Partners, LLC, to see if they would give a demonstration at the next meeting on working with local communities for design, financial analyses, mapping, and planning.

- D. Development of a Request for Proposals for Broadband Services (based on Kewaunee County approach)

Discussion:

Due to the high interest from ISP's and federal and state funding opportunities, it was the consensus of the committee that a RFP is not needed at this time for broadband expansion.

6. Next Meeting: Monday, September 27, 2021.

7. Next Steps

Topics for next meeting:

- Invite Geo Partners to give a presentation
- UW Extension administrative support role
- County staffing role
- Grant updates
- Expectations from providers and partners (sharing information)

8. **MOTION BY OLSON; SECOND BY EUTING TO ADJOURN THE MEETING AT 5:26 P.M. MOTION CARRIED.**