



# MARATHON COUNTY BROADBAND TASK FORCE

## MEETING AGENDA

Date & Time of Meeting: **Monday, October 5, 2020 at 4:00 P.M.**

Meeting Location: **Conference Room 5, 212 River Drive, Wausau, WI**

**Task Force Purpose:** *Develop recommendations identifying the potential role of Marathon County in facilitating the expansion of Broadband access in Marathon County. Review the Report: Broadband for Marathon County Broadband Assessment and Plan prepared by Design Nine and develop broad policies and partnership recommendations relating to the expansion of broadband/internet services throughout Marathon County.*

**Task Force Members:** Katrina Becker, Eric Budleski Sandi Cihlar, Sara Guild, Jacob Langenhahn, Emmett McBride, Kent Olson, and John Robinson

The meeting site identified above will be open to the public. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health directives, Marathon County encourages Task Force members and the public to attend this meeting remotely. Instead of attendance in person, Task Force members and the public may attend this meeting by **telephone conference**. If Task Force members or members of the public cannot attend remotely, Marathon County requests that appropriate safety measures, including adequate social distancing, be utilized by all in-person attendees.

Persons wishing to attend the meeting by phone may call into the **telephone conference beginning five (5) minutes prior** to the start time indicated above using the following number: 1-408-418-9388 Access Code: 146 963 3750 Password: BroadbandTF. If you are prompted to provide an "Attendee Identification Number," enter the "#" sign. No other number is required to participate in the telephone conference. When you enter the telephone conference, **PLEASE PUT YOUR PHONE ON MUTE!**

### AGENDA ITEMS:

1. CALL TO ORDER
2. PUBLIC COMMENTS (15 minute limit)
3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE SEPTEMBER 14, 2020 BROADBAND TASK FORCE MEETING
- EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATIONS AND COMMITTEE DISCUSSION
4. WEDC BROADBAND PILOT PROGRAM APPLICATION
5. POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIP WITH MCDEVCO
- POLICY DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION:
6. DETERMINE EVALUATION CRITERIA AND PROCESS FOR MARATHON COUNTY BROADBAND PROJECTS
  - A. FIBER PROJECTS
  - B. TOWER INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS
7. ROUTES TO RECOVERY FUND USE
  - A. EXISTING TOWER USE
  - B. UPDATE ON LIBRARIES AND POLLING LOCATIONS AS WIFI HOTSPOTS
  - C. OTHER POTENTIAL PROJECTS
8. PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION GRANT OPPORTUNITY
9. NEXT MEETING LOGISTICS AND TOPICS
10. NEXT STEPS
11. ADJOURN

*"Any person planning to attend this meeting who needs some type of special accommodation in order to participate should call the County Clerk's Office at 715-261-1500 or e-mail [infomarathon@mail.co.marathon.wi.us](mailto:infomarathon@mail.co.marathon.wi.us) one business day before the meeting.*

**SIGNED** /s/ John Robinson

Presiding Officer or Designee

**FAXED TO:**

News Dept.at Daily Herald (715-848-9361), City Pages (715-848-5887)  
Midwest Radio Group (715-848-3158), Marshfield News (877-943-0443)  
TPP Printing (715-223-3505)

**FAXED BY:** NA  
**FAXED DATE:** 10/01/20  
**FAXED TIME:** 1:00 pm

**NOTICE POSTED AT COURTHOUSE**

**BY:**  
**DATE:**  
**TIME:**



## BROADBAND TASK FORCE MINUTES

Monday, September 14, 2020  
212 River Drive, Room 5, Wausau WI 54403

**Attendance:**

**Present**

John Robinson, Chair  
Melinda Osterberg

**Absent**

**Also Present:**

**VIA Web or Phone:**

Nancy Anderson  
Katrina Becker  
Eric Budleski  
Wade Carroll  
Sandi Cihlar  
Richard Downey  
Randy Fifrick  
Sara Guild  
Nathan Harder  
Stacey Johnson  
Gerard Klein  
Lance Leonhard  
Amanda Ley  
Emmett McBride  
Scott Nymen  
Kent Olson  
Paul Osterman  
Rachel Schemelin

### AGENDA ITEMS

1. **Call Meeting to Order**

Meeting was called to order by Chair John Robinson at 4:00 pm. All participants welcomed.

2. **Public Comments**

No public comments

3. **Approval of Minutes of the August 17, 2020 Meeting.**

Motion to approve by S. Cihlar and seconded by E. Budleski.

### EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATIONS AND COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

4. **Presentation on Oneida County Broadband Expansion Project – Stacey Johnson**

S. Johnson, WEDC Regional Economic Director presented on Oneida County's broadband expansion project. Previous to her role at the WEDC, she served as the Director of the Oneida County Economic Development Corporation. Johnson explained how the Oneida County Economic Development Corporation worked to enhance broadband; applied for PSC grants and answered questions Task Force members had on partnerships that were necessary for the project's success. Johnson also serves on the Governor's State Broadband Task Force and is available to answer any other questions that may arise after today's meeting.

5. **Presentation on Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Auction – Scott Nyman**

S. Nyman, Cirrinity Corporation, presented on the Rural Digital Fund Auction, also known as Option 904 with the FCC which would bring high speed fixed broadband service to rural homes and small businesses that lack it. The FCC has

set aside \$20.4 billion to be awarded over a 10 year period in 2 phases. Bids will be accepted for four performance tiers, each with varying speed and usage allowances and either high or low latency. Scott displayed a map of eligible auction blocks (areas determined to be eligible for the auction within Marathon County) and explained the auction reverse bidding process and costs. Bidding for these auction blocks will start next month and the winning bidders have to build 40% of the project by the end of three years. These blocks total an estimate of \$20 million that will be available to the successful bidder for the next 10 years for expanding broadband access under this program. If no one bids on these auction blocks, they will put out for bids in Phase 2.

## **POLICY DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION**

### **6. Routes to Recovery Fund Use**

Please refer to the letter in your packet from K. Gibbs which was sent to all Marathon County municipalities with regard to the potential reallocation of their Routes to Recovery funds to be used for broadband expansion by the County. We received communication from several of these communities that they are requesting reallocation of the funds. Per L. Leonhard, in order for us to be reimbursed under the Routes to Recovery program, we must incur the cost by November 6, i.e., “pay the bill.” His understanding is that the actual work performed must be done during the “Pandemic.” A substantial amount of work needs to take place no later than the first quarter of 2021. We expect to hear from the communities by the end of the week. There are also additional criteria that projects reimbursed under this program would need to meet.

#### **A. Existing Tower Use**

#### **B. Tower Infrastructure Acquisition**

#### **C. Update on Libraries and Polling Locations as Wi-Fi Hotspots**

G. Klein introduced Nathan Harder. Nathan is a network engineer expert and has been retained by Marathon County. From the meeting with the ISPs, he will be researching triangular steel towers, cost, location, and how the County can pre-negotiate. Harding will also research cellular and broadband capacity at the County voting and library sites, determine the capacity to add equipment to the County’s West Wayside tower, and determine the possibility of making the tower available to two different wireless internet service providers. DC Everest School District and the Wausau Community Area Network will partner to increase speeds and service to the Rothschild Elementary School, the new Riverside Fire Station and other Village of Weston sites including the police department. Preliminary research on Hatley and Riverview schools is underway.

#### **D. School District Survey Information – Rachel Schemelin**

R. Schemelin is the E-Rate and Broadband Education Consultant for the Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction. Schemelin shared how DPI is currently supporting school districts in their broadband outreach and initiatives. DPI is encouraging school districts to collect information from their families, input that data into local student information systems, which would then feed into the State database. This information would be used to build dashboards for districts to visualize and identify their digital equity gaps. Please have your school districts reach out to R. Schemelin if they need assistance in gathering information to get to the State. This could be a good tool to use for Road to Recovery projects. S. Johnson also added that the more schools participate in DPI surveys, the more attention they will receive from various funding groups looking to connect K-12 students. Data collections are optional. E. McBride indicated that the DC Everest School District should have their data to the State in the next couple of weeks.

### **7. August Internet Service Provider Meeting Summary**

A summary of this meeting is in your packet. The timeline to use the Route to Recovery Funds was a burden that limited the ISPs interest in the program. The ISPs identified a need for Marathon County to track addresses where they could not provide service. This address database could possibly happen through the DPI process, however, residences that do not have school age children would need to be gathered separately.

### **8. Public Service Commission Grant Opportunity**

The Public Service Grant process is underway. Applications are due in December. Next meeting discussions should include what role Marathon County should have, as the County will need to work with an Internet Service Provider on any future applications for PSC funds. G. Klein pointed out that the FCC map has incorrect information and listed areas having high speed internet available where that service is unavailable. The PSC is aware that their maps are incorrect. Marathon County should create a map that depicts accurate available service information that can be used in future funding applications. Northwoods Connect was the only ISP that submitted a proposal which is in the meeting packet. Paul Osterman, Northwoods Connect, explained their proposal. They are working in Forest County where they are using fiber from the tower to the home which is another idea for a project. He reminded members that the grant applications must be completed ASAP. The proposed towers would be able to support equipment for cell providers as well.

9. **Next Meeting Logistics and Topics**

10. **Next Steps**

October 5, 2020.

- Opportunity for Technical Assistance (S Johnson)
- Obtain List of Bidders for our priority areas (S Nyman)
- Continue to track the Route to Recovery Funds and how we might use them
- Tracking school district data to capture addresses with no service to create our own mapping
- Create task force support committee

11. **Adjourn**

Respectfully Submitted by:  
Nancy M Anderson



**Melinda Osterberg**  
**Community Development Educator**  
Mobile: 715-252-9459  
[Melinda.osterberg@wisc.edu](mailto:Melinda.osterberg@wisc.edu)

### **October 5, 2020 Broadband Task Force Meeting**

It may be beneficial to review the following resources and documents prior to the October 5, 2020 Broadband Task Force Meeting:

#### **WEDC Broadband Connectors Pilot Program**

Marathon County submitted an application for technical assistance as part of the WEDC Broadband Connectors Pilot Program. If selected, the County would meet weekly with technical experts to determine how best to expand broadband in Marathon County. The application was submitted in a web based form, so the application in its entirety is unavailable, however, the County's response to the application questions are copied below.

- *Describe the community's main challenges in accessing effective, reliable, and affordable internet for all*

Marathon County's size, geography, sporadic population, and lack of interested or capable internet service providers combine to present a significant challenge to providing effective, reliable, and affordable internet service. This geographically sizeable county has a widely dispersed population and it largely lacks incumbent internet service providers that are interested in, or capable of, expanding access to the more challenging areas.

Marathon County has the largest land mass of any county in the State so any countywide project automatically becomes large in scale. Supplying the necessary infrastructure alone for a countywide broadband project is a daunting challenge. In addition, the population density in many parts of the County is relatively low and unevenly distributed, with homes spread out between forests, rolling hills, and productive agricultural lands. Topography and tree cover pose additional obstacles for cellular and fixed wireless coverage.

Historically, the majority of the County's unincorporated areas have been served by Frontier Communications, which has provided landline phone and DSL services in the more rural areas. In 2015, Frontier Communications was awarded the Connect America Fund (CAF II) auction for expanding broadband to many blocks in the central and eastern portions of the County, which was a positive opportunity. However, Frontier has found it challenging to maintain its existing (aging) copper-based land lines while at the same time expand service to new customers in the County; it has also struggled to meet the minimum broadband speed standards of 10/1 Mbps that were established by the CAF-II program. Frontier's aging infrastructure and high staff turnover was already hindering its ability to provide consistent service and expand access when, in April 2020, the company filed bankruptcy, adding yet another roadblock to their expansion efforts. To this day, Frontier remains unable to maintain reliable service in many parts of the County, creating a very real health and public safety concern because the lack of reliable service impacts access to even the most basic emergency services like 911. Under these circumstances, Marathon County does not feel confident Frontier will be able to meet its commitments to expand broadband to its rural residents anytime soon.

Looking beyond Frontier, Marathon County largely lacks incumbent internet service providers (ISPs) interested in expanding service access or quality in the very rural areas of the County. Spectrum and TDS provide quality high-speed internet service in most of the County's incorporated areas, but neither company has been willing to extend service into the rural areas. Marathon County has repeatedly tried to speak with local ISPs that are already serving some of the less-populated regions and encourage them to expand their services into the rest of the county. Those conversations revealed that most ISPs have determined the County's low rural population density and geographical challenges will not allow them to get a sufficient return on their investment. As such, they are primarily focusing their growth on the more populated areas or on regions where they already have an established footprint, and are more inclined to put money into upgrading their current services than into expanding to new areas.

In addition, in the past, some of the more rural governments tended to view broadband as a "luxury" and did not prioritize efforts to bring it to their community. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has sharply highlighted the need for adequate countywide high-speed internet in all regions. It has both increased the demand for it and emphasized the disruptions created by a lack of it. As such, communities that previously were inclined to view it as a "luxury" now understand the importance of expanding access to all residents as soon as possible, and recently started providing funding and other forms of support to the county to assist with the effort.

- *Detail the community's broadband goals*

Marathon County has set an ambitious goal of achieving countywide high-speed internet by the end of 2022. The County's commitment to expanding high speed internet access is widely publicized and remains consistent throughout its planning documents. Its Comprehensive and Strategic Plans, as well as the community-based Greater Wausau Region Economic Development Strategic Plan, all set forth goals for broadband expansion in the County.

The 2016 Marathon County Comprehensive Plan includes broadband as part of the solutions listed under three different chapters. Specifically, it states:

Ch. 3: Health & Human Services

5. Maximize innovative technology, systems, and infrastructure to meet current and emerging health and social needs.

b. Enable rural citizens to have reliable, affordable, high-speed internet access to provide access to long-distance medical care and services via technology.

Ch. 8: Infrastructure

4. Ensure adequate energy and telecommunications services

d. Support the expansion of broadband access across the County

5. Strive to provide affordable, accessible, high-speed internet access throughout the County.

a. Develop a comprehensive approach to countywide high-speed internet access, including broadband and other technologies.

Ch. 10: Economic Development

5. Maintain infrastructure to support economic growth.

b. Support technology in the workplace, particularly through access to broadband.

The County's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan provides more specific action steps for achieving its broadband goals as part of its effort to make Marathon County the safest, healthiest, and most prosperous county in the state. The Strategic Plan details five strategies to help achieve the goal of providing "affordable, accessible, high-speed internet access throughout the County" as follows:

Develop a comprehensive approach to county-wide high-speed internet access

Promote partnerships between carriers/providers and government

Develop financial incentives to encourage carriers/providers to commit to helping accomplish this objective

Establish a dig-once policy for county roadway reconstruction and bridge projects that engages providers in a discussion about whether to include conduit for fiber

Marathon County Government will invite all carriers provides services in Marathon County to present their current coverage, speeds, and costs

Additionally, the Greater Wausau Region Economic Development Strategic Plan includes the following initiative that supports the expansion of broadband access throughout the County:

### 3.3) Broadband and High-Speed Connectivity

Extend the reach of fiber to rural areas of Marathon County and ensure that 5G connectivity is available in Wausau and other communities in the region.

- *Identify any partners that have committed to working on broadband expansion*

Marathon County's government is currently leading the area's broadband expansion effort. In early summer of 2020, it formed a Broadband Task Force to help direct and inform the County's process. The Task Force includes representatives from area school districts, the business community, the healthcare industry, engaged private citizens, and local governments.

The Greater Wausau Area Chamber of Commerce, Greater Wausau Prosperity Partnership, and the Marathon County Economic Development Corporation (MCDEVCO) have publicly supported and encouraged the expansion of broadband service.

In addition, local governments at all levels have expressed support for expansion efforts and many are actively partnering with the County. Ten municipalities recently reallocated a portion of their "Routes to Recovery" funds to Marathon County for broadband expansion to help address immediate needs for improving access to health care/telemedicine, telework and virtual learning opportunities, thus actively demonstrating their commitment to expanding broadband access.

Conversations have been held with local school district superintendents and IT directors to identify education-related needs, particularly in light of the new COVID-19 remote learning requirements. Educational institutions are trying to maximize their resources and ensure access for virtual learning opportunities. Many have expressed interest in collaborating with the County when appropriate opportunities arise to achieve shared goals.

Multiple ISPs have attended one or more meetings with Marathon County representatives to discuss potential opportunities for collaboration, indicating a clear interest in partnering. These discussions



revealed that many of them have either expanded their coverage area in recent years or are planning to do so in the near future. However, much of this expansion continues to focus on the more populated areas, and heavily emphasizes towers-based service, thus still leaving significant gaps across the County. Unfortunately, there has thus far been minimal follow-up from ISPs interested in developing a specific plan for expanding their footprint to the more rural areas.

Various key businesses and organizations have expressed support for expansion efforts, including Greenheck Fan, Aspirus Health Care, and the Marathon County Farmers Union. It is expected they and others will respond favorably to requests for more active support once a specific plan is presented.

- *Outline steps the community has already taken to expand broadband*

Marathon County's formal work on expanding broadband access began in 2009 with the preparation of a Broadband Gap Analysis. The Analysis provided a summary of the need for, and availability of, high-speed internet in the County. However, it recommended the County rely on the private sector to expand access as market demand increased. Following this recommendation, the Marathon County Board opted to rely on private internet service providers to expand access, taking no formal action to incentivize expansion in any area of the County. Unfortunately, they did not anticipate the significant geographical and population challenges the County presented that inhibited the natural expansion of private service. As such, the broadband environment has not substantially improved since the preparation of the 2009 study.

In 2015, Marathon County established a Connectivity Task Force to assess if the broadband status had changed since 2009. This task force's findings reiterated the need for more high-speed internet in the County and restarted the conversation. In 2018, the Board included broadband expansion in its new Strategic Plan and also created a new focus group, which again affirmed the County's need for broadband expansion, and also explored some possible reasons for the delays in expansion to date.

In 2019, the Board acknowledged that the private sector was unlikely to expand access without local government support and sought professional guidance about how best to proceed. The County retained Design Nine, a private telecommunications consultant, to prepare a Broadband Feasibility Study. The study was completed in January 2020 and provided a summary of the existing broadband environment as well as a potential design for achieving a countywide broadband network that would provide access to 89% of households, along with a financial analysis for expanding access.

During the planning process, County Board supervisors and staff met with various groups, including businesses and industry organizations like the Marathon County Farmers Union, municipalities, and educational leaders, to better understand how the lack of broadband services impacts their ability to run businesses, serve their customers/residents, and provide virtual learning opportunities to their students/children.

Since completion of the Broadband Feasibility Study, Marathon County has met twice with incumbent internet service providers to gauge interest in partnering to expand access; it has also formed the Broadband Task Force to help keep efforts moving forward. Unfortunately, the ISPs have not embraced the plans outlined in the Design Nine report, which called for the County to develop a system utilizing a fiber "backbone" combined with a series of towers. There is now concern that even if we built the recommended system, the ISPs still would not use it. Due to the lack of ISP commitment to utilize fiber, combined with the statutory limitations on the County that

prevents it from developing its own system, the County now believes it needs to explore other options to initiate access to basic broadband services for our residents.

In fall of 2020, the County retained a limited-term consultant to assist with utilizing the “Routes to Recovery” funds prior to the deadline. The immediate goal is to expand broadband access in areas that will help address critical needs for services brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is expected to include expanding broadband capacity at public libraries and rural public buildings such as town halls and polling places across the County. Several communities have shared a portion of their “Routes to Recovery” funding with the County in order to more efficiently address broadband access issues and meet the immediate needs of their constituents, especially in the areas of distance learning and telehealth, and these areas will therefore be prioritized when possible.

Additional information regarding Marathon County’s past and current broadband efforts and the associated planning documents are available at:  
<https://www.co.marathon.wi.us/Departments/InformationTechnology/PlanningforHighSpeedInternet.aspx>

Marathon County has already taken many steps to educate residents about, and advocate for, broadband expansion, but it has not been enough. The pieces are in hand, but the County lacks the unique expertise and experience needed to put the puzzle of broadband expansion together. It now needs skilled technical assistance to help determine how best to proceed and where to focus its limited resources in order to maximize broadband service. If selected for the Technical Assistance Pilot Program, the County would utilize this assistance in order to achieve the following goals:

- Develop partnerships with internet service providers to serve the underserved and unserved areas in a timely manner
- Explore other ownership structures for community broadband expansion, such as cooperatives
- Leverage partner interest in contributing to expansion efforts
- Identify best practices and conduct a resource analysis to match County resources and maximize partnerships, staffing and leadership structure for sustaining the broadband expansion initiative

Marathon County is ready and willing to execute a countywide broadband expansion plan – but it must be the RIGHT plan. Technical assistance during this crucial phase will be invaluable in determining how best to move beyond talk and into action. The County respectfully requests it be selected for this pilot program and looks forward to partnering with the WEDC to bring the life-changing benefits of high-speed broadband service to its rural citizens for decades to come.

### **Evaluation Criteria and Process for Marathon County Broadband Projects**

A great deal of our time on October 5th will be dedicated to developing evaluation criteria and review process for broadband projects supported by Marathon County. To make the most efficient use of our time on Monday, it would be good to think about benchmarks for determining when Marathon County should support a project. Common measurement criteria include:

- Number of residences and businesses served
- Cost per residence/business served
- Speed of service (the Task Force has previously determined that the minimum speed for supported projects is 25 Mbps download/3 Mbps upload)

- Existing infrastructure and service in the proposed area
- Residential and commercial cost of proposed service
- Public safety implications of the project

We will also discuss the County’s process for evaluating and reviewing broadband service proposals. For reference, I have copied the Broadband Task Force Charter below, which describes the purpose of the Task Force.

**Broadband Task Force**

(a)

**[Reporting relationship.] Reports to Infrastructure Committee.**

(b)

**Mission/Purpose.** Develop recommendations identifying the potential role of Marathon County in facilitating the expansion of Broadband access in Marathon County. Review the Report: Broadband for Marathon County Broadband Assessment and Plan prepared by Design 9 and develop broad policies and partnership recommendations relating to the expansion of broadband/internet services throughout Marathon County

(c)

**Statutory Responsibilities:** None.

(d)

**Membership:** The Task Force shall be comprised of 9 members Four members of the Marathon County Board including members from EEEDC and Infrastructure Committees; and five community members with interest and/or expertise in the internet/broadband services.

(e)

**Member terms:** Concurrent with terms on the County Board.

(f)

**Duties and Responsibilities:** By April 1, 2021:

Review the report: Broadband for Marathon County Broadband Assessment and Plan prepared by Design 9 and information received from Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and identify potential options for the County to pursue relating to expansion of broadband throughout the county.

Identify strategies, partners and potential funding sources that will support the expansion of broadband services to underserved areas.

Make recommendations to the County Board on the role of Marathon County relating to it’s role in facilitating the expansion of broadband services to the residents of Marathon County

Establish priorities for the allocation of resources to meet public safety and access needs for residents in the county.

## Meeting Connection Information

You hopefully have received a WebEx calendar invite for the October 5<sup>th</sup> meeting, if not, I have also copied the meeting information below. I look forward to seeing you Monday!

Meeting number (access code): 146 963 3750

Meeting password: BroadbandTF

Monday, October 5, 2020

4:00 pm | (UTC-05:00) Central Time (US & Canada) | 1 hr 30 mins

Join meeting<<https://ccitc.webex.com/ccitc/j.php?MTID=m6aa82d5b85f2c435644a715f0c2cfca8>>

Tap to join from a mobile device (attendees only)

+1-408-418-9388,,1469633750##<tel:%2B1-408-418-9388,,\*01\*1469633750%23%23\*01\*> United States Toll

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Global call-in

numbers<<https://ccitc.webex.com/ccitc/globalcallin.php?MTID=medfeea6ba2e9e71a92a0288aa51045fd>>

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