

Office of the Broadband Committee

Town of Halifax

PO Box 127

West Halifax, Vermont 05358

Meeting Minutes

Approved: August 24, 2020

Date: Monday, July 20, 2020, 7-8:30PM

Place: Conference Call

Attending: Committee members: Tristan Roberts, Bob Teree, Cara Cheyette, Stephan Chait,
and David Jones. Visitor: Edee Edwards

Notes By: David Jones

Call to Order

Tristan Roberts called the meeting to order at 7:00PM.

Changes and Additions to Agenda

David Jones suggested we should discuss high-needs locations in Other Business.

Review and Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

Cara Cheyette moved to accept the minutes of the June 15 meeting. Stephan Chait seconded the motion. All present agreed. The minutes were approved.

Old Business

Deerfield Valley Communications Union District Status Report

David reported the outcome of the Governing Board meeting on July 15, which he and Stephan Chait attended.

Londonderry and Vernon joined the District, increasing to 15 the number of member towns. There are just over 20 towns in Windham County [actual number: 24]. Steven John, the CUD's Vice Chair, met with the Putney Selectboard on July 15 and is having informal discussions with residents in other towns.

The CUD is the recipient of a \$10,000 grant from the Vermont Community Foundation. This is intended to fund start-up costs. The funds will be used for administrative, financial, and legal purposes. Rob Fish, our CUD coordinator in the Public Service Department helped to arrange this

grant. [Note: other CUDs also received similar grants.] In addition, the PSD has applied for a Northern Borders grant, with the intention of distributing it to CUDs.

The CUD joined the Vermont Communications Union District Association (VCUDA), which is led by the Chair of ECFiber. We have issues and concerns in common with other CUDs. This organization is an “interlocal” group that will provide a forum for sharing and solution development. It is not a municipality. It will not enter into contractual agreements but can provide a forum for discussion and development of action plans.

The PSD just issued the guidelines for CUDs to apply for grants that will allocate federal Covid-19 funds. The PSD will disburse these funds to CUDs as directed in H.966 legislation that Gov. Scott signed earlier this month. There is a limit of \$100,000 per CUD. If we are awarded funds, we will use them for consulting, administrative help, grant writing, and legal services.

Committee members may have read articles in the Brattleboro Reformer or the Deerfield Valley News about the Governing Board meeting on July 15. The information in those articles was conveyed before 6PM, after which the CUD became unable to discuss publicly one of the opportunities it may pursue. The inability to discuss the topic further is driven by Federal rules that govern the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund auction. Our counsel informs us that to fully conform with the rules, we should withhold information about some activities until this is no longer necessary, at which time we can disclose the information fully, as we would normally. The CUD Governing Board will go into Executive Session if this topic is discussed. We don’t want an impermissible disclosure to risk the effort we are making. David suggested that the articles provide a good picture of the general plan. Other business will be conducted as usual. Cara suggested that the CUD should emphasize that it is committed to open meeting law and will share information to the extent that is possible.

Stephan noted that Laura Sibilica has been instrumental in developing legislation that is helpful to CUDs and is supportive in other ways. David said Laura advocates for our interest relentlessly and capably. David recalled someone describing her as a bulldog that won’t let go.

Stephan was part of a subcommittee that put together a statement of Vision and Principles to replace our old Vision statement. The new statement describes the nature of the service we will provide. The Mission statement is unchanged. A Communications Committee has formed. One of its tasks will be to provide a consistent message for Broadband Committee to communicate in our towns. These communications will aim to report progress and set realistic expectations.

Tristan reported that Duncan Cable is extending fiber to some roads in Wilmington. He asked if Duncan Cable was asked about their interest in serving the CUD area. David said the CUD had contacted Duncan but they expressed no interest in meeting with us. We understand they are expanding in their service area but not in all sections of the towns they serve. There will still be a need for the CUD in areas they don’t serve.

Tristan said the CUD seems to be making good progress and expressed gratitude for the work done by David and Stephan. He said the Halifax Broadband Committee stands ready to support local uptake when the time is right.

New Business

Communications

David reported that some CUD member towns are working on flyers to be inserted in this year's tax bills. He asked Patty Dow whether there was an opportunity for us to do this in Halifax. Patty said the tax bills were about to go out, so this will be a task for next year.

Other Business

The Department of Public Service has made an attempt to identify the locations of students and people with telehealth needs who do not have adequate broadband service. The PSD can allocated federal funds to subsidize high-speed connections to these locations. Only 13 such locations were reported in Halifax. The Department coordinated with the Agency of Education and a statewide medical group to get this information. Whitingham was the town with the largest number of locations, 82. The Whitingham Representative said he did not know how the 82 locations came to be identified.

These subsidies could create an incentive for additional build-out that is helpful for those getting the service but could also cause the number of unserved locations to become lower than a CUD can support sustainably. The subsidized work must be completed by the end of this year. Committee members expressed doubt that substantial work could be completed in a few months and frustration that funds were allocated in this piecemeal way. David wondered why only 13 students in Halifax had been identified. Bob asked if the CUD would have been qualified for the subsidies if it had started work earlier. David said the District would certainly try to alter its construction sequence if it was prudent to serve these locations first. Everyone on the Governing Board is aware that educational and telehealth needs are real and that there are both technical and economic issues to be solved. We agreed there was little practical action we could take as a Committee.

Bob asked if there was an outline schedule for constructing a network. David said we all have the same question: how soon can this happen? But there are several steps, each of which takes time to complete. The Windham Regional Commission is working on a business plan, which is scheduled for completion in August. The plan is intended to qualify us for a loan from the Vermont Economic Development Authority. With those funds, we can begin engineering. The next step would be pole make-ready, followed by construction. We can expect Halifax to be among the first towns to get service because we have a high number and a high proportion of underserved locations. But we can't put a date on it now.

The pole make-ready requires inspection of every pole, which in our area means hiking off-road to reach many of them. Stephan said this is a foundation for design work. The idea of using volunteers has been discussed by the District. The task would require close supervision if those doing the work hadn't done it before. Bob said if there was a way for volunteers to help remove roadblocks to completion, there would be strong interest.

Hearing of Visitors

No additional topics were discussed.

Adjournment

Stephan moved the meeting should adjourn. David seconded the motion. All present agreed. The meeting was adjourned at 7:50PM.