

Office of the Broadband Committee

Town of Halifax

PO Box 127

West Halifax, Vermont 05358

Meeting Minutes

Approved: September 21, 2020

Date: Monday, August 24, 2020, 7-8:30PM

Place: Conference Call

Attending: Committee members: Tristan Roberts, Bob Teree, 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

None.

Review and Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

Stephan Chait moved to accept the minutes of the July 27 meeting. Tristan Roberts seconded the motion. All present agreed. The minutes were approved.

Old Business

Wi-Fi Hotspot

David reported the Halifax School Board did not want to pursue the Public Service Department's offer of a free Wi-Fi hotspot that would distribute the School's broadband signal to the parking areas around the school at off-hours. We found that sharing the signal at off-hours did not violate the terms of the E-Rate subsidy that pays a large share of the broadband cost. But the school has to focus on how it will provide instruction in a Covid-19 environment. David hoped to learn more from Paul Blais about how he connected the town office but has not made contact. The same approach might work to set up a hot spot at another anchor institution.

School Addresses

We succeeded in getting the addresses of Halifax and Readsboro students entered into the Public

Service Department's database of priority locations for extensions of service using Covid-19 subsidies. But there have been few offers from incumbent vendors to connect these addresses.

There is a program funded by CARES Act funds that would provide service to unserved locations, focusing on priority locations. Vendors have proposed projects to provide service to nearly 12% of unserved locations in the towns belonging to the Deerfield Valley Communications Union District, mainly in Whitingham, Readsboro, and Wilmington. VTel Wireless has proposed to serve 44 locations in Halifax. The CUD is empowered to object to these proposals but it made a policy decision to not object because it will not stand in the way of our citizens getting the best service that is possible now. The CUD did urge the Public Service Department to verify that the service is actually provided at the promised speeds of over 25Mbps down and 3Mbps up. The areas to be served in Halifax are clustered near the Winery and the beaver pond. We don't have a clear picture of why these locations were selected and how the service would be upgraded so that the promised speeds are achieved. We believe that fiber broadband service provided by our CUD will be vastly superior to the wireless service.

CUD Update

The CUD has received two grants to date, from the Vermont Community Foundation and the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation to help with start-up costs. The CUD expects to receive a larger grant of CARES Act funds distributed through the Public Service Department. We expected to use the CARES Act funds to hire a consultant that would help us to navigate strategic choices we will make this year. But our RFP for consulting assistance yielded no responses. The six qualified consultants that we identified declined to bid because a) they had previous commitments to other projects, b) conflicts of interest prevented them from supporting us, or c) they consult only for the purpose of planning an implementation they will carry out. The CUD had defined the planning agenda in order to write the RFP and will proceed to execute that agenda without the consulting assistance.

The CUD adopted an initial budget and a set of accounting policies and administrative procedures. A purchasing policy will follow.

The Communications Committee will use some of the CARES Act funds to improve the DVFiber website, create outreach programs, establish a repository for internal documents, and provide @DVFiber email addresses. This Committee will also focus on advocacy. ACTION: David will forward the messages that the Communications Committee would like us to send to our legislators.

The CUD and other CUDs, working together as the Vermont Communications Union District Association, met with VELCO, an organization that represents all of Vermont's electric utilities, to discuss how pole studies could be coordinated and how the data could be consolidated and maintained. Assessing the condition of the poles and what conditions must be remediated is the first step in constructing a network that will run on the poles.

David reported that one Halifax resident wrote the CUD to ask how fiber could be delivered to his home now. The CUD has had one or two dozen similar inquiries to date. A campaign to generate interest will be important when we have a business plan to guide us. When we compare our District to ECFiber, we have lower density (homes and businesses per mile). This means we will need a higher percentage of homes and businesses to become customers in order to achieve the necessary threshold of about six customers per network mile. Our Broadband Committee and committees in other towns will be engaged by the Communications Committee to develop outreach ideas and execute the program.

Stephan Chait said the Governing Board is working hard to move the CUD forward.

David said changed the dates of the Broadband Committee's remaining meetings so that they all follow CUD Governing Board meetings.

Housing Rehabilitation Fund Availability

Tristan investigated whether the Housing Rehabilitation Fund, a source of revolving loan funds that help lower income residents to finance home repairs, could be used to finance construction of underground conduit leading from utility poles to mobile homes. He talked with Andy Rice in Halifax and Patty Webster in Marlboro, who sit on the Committee that decides which projects to fund. He learned that the funds are generally focused on housing rehabilitation; providing improved broadband may not qualify as rehabilitation and may not be supported by those who are allocating the available funds.

David said that ECFiber is using CARES Act funds to extend underground conduit to 700 mobile homes in their service area, increasing their customer count by about 10%. The cost of this conduit had been prohibitive to residents of these homes. We will want to find a funding source for this purpose in our area.

Tristan asked if there is more that we can do now to investigate sources of funds for this purpose. David said this would be a great topic to pursue. The Board knows we need to find a way to enable everyone to access broadband. David suggested that a discussion with Steven John in Marlboro and Ann Manwaring in Wilmington would be the first step for investigating on behalf of the CUD.

Edee Edwards suggested we need one or two exemplars who can speak to the need for broadband in this time. Her connection is inadequate for her to communicate effectively when she is working remotely. There may also be an interest in creating a sponsorship program in which residents can help to pay for the service provided to others with real needs but limited resources. Tristan agreed that a "sponsor a neighbor" program could be appealing to many of us. David said the CUD would be able to define several levels of sponsorship that would be based on the average costs of construction, installation, and service at each address. He noted Steven John in Marlboro believes there are many who will put up money to make the CUD happen.

New Business

None

Oher Business

Bob Teree reported on his experience using external antennas to receive wireless broadband signals. If your receiving device supports two antennas, you should use two unamplified directional antennas, one used for download and the other for upload. External antennas are better than internal antennas. These work better than a signal booster. He is testing the Nomad Wireless service for use as broadband. Bob had tried to use VTel Wireless without success. He noted that, when using a mobile device to determine signal strength, bars do not indicate speed. Speed tests are essential.

Hearing of Visitors

Edee Edwards said she had asked at a recent Selectboard meeting whether there were any known plans to replace the CoverageCo mobile network service that has been discontinued. Edee said that her DSL service is better than the service that many residents have but it has been interrupted due to weather. When the DSL is interrupted, a mobile signal would be helpful. She has used VTel Wireless in the past and may take up VTel again as a backup to her DSL. Bob said he can help anyone improve their wireless setup if they can get signal from the VTel tower in Halifax Center. Edee said that VTel customer service does not seem to be responding to her inquires. David said that VTel may be overwhelmed with customer inquiries from people migrating to this area full time and needing more service than they used before. It might pay to keep trying them. VTel is also leasing its towers to ATT, Sprint, and TMobile for mobile wireless services now and is expected to lease access to Verizon as well. But the TMobile service is not reaching Edee's house.

Adjournment

Tristan moved the meeting should adjourn. Stephan seconded the motion. All present agreed. The meeting was adjourned at 7:00PM. The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, September 21.