

Office of the Broadband Committee

Town of Halifax

PO Box 127

West Halifax, Vermont 05358

Meeting Minutes

Approved: December 9, 2020

Date: Monday, November 16, 2020, 7-8:30PM

Place: Conference Call

Attending: Committee members: Tristan Roberts, Stephan Chait, Cara Cheyette, and David Jones.
Visitors: Douglas and Marilou Parkhurst

Notes By: David Jones

Call to Order

Tristan Roberts called the meeting to order at 7:02PM.

Changes and Additions to Agenda

None.

Review and Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

Stephan Chait moved to accept the minutes of the October 26 and September 21 meetings as written. Tristan Roberts seconded the motion. All present agreed. The minutes were approved.

Old Business

DVFiber Status Report

Stephan Chait explained that David Jones is the clerk for Deerfield Valley Communications Union District. The monthly Governing Board meeting was held the previous Wednesday, November 11. David reported that the first order of business was a public hearing on the proposed budget for 2021. That budget was similar to a draft that had been included in a draft annual report that had been distributed to Selectboards of all member towns. Both versions are based on the published budget included in the Business Plan that is posted on the Windham Regional Commission website. The difference was that the newer version included more specific details of spending authorizations. As the year progresses, there will be more specific spending authorizations that are taken out of the amounts in more general budget categories. The budget will be approved formally at the Governing Board meeting on December 9.

The next order of business was to admit three new towns, Dummerston, Putney, and Westminster, bringing the total membership up to 19 towns. Stephan noted that 27 towns belong to the Windham Regional Commission. David said Newfane and Townshend are two large towns in the middle of the District that have not joined yet.

A task force reported that it submitted an application for Northern Borders grant funding. The amount requested was close to \$300K. Another task force is looking at how to raise matching funds that are needed to receive the grant funds. This entire grant will be used primarily to complete pole studies in remaining towns.

In addition, a \$20K grant that had been awarded by the Vermont Community Foundation was received.

Steven John, the Vice Chair, reported on an initiative to create a map of our service area. This project will be completed shortly. We will be studying our area closely to understand the best sequence for construction.

The Governing Board approved an expenditure to map the District in further detail.

Paul Butler, the Treasurer, reported on our financial condition. The pole study and the grant that funded it comprise the majority of expense and revenue this year.

The Finance Committee is cataloging the sources of funds available to the District. The amount, timing, and conditions associated with these funds sources will drive the pace of construction.

A major first step toward construction will be to use the pole study data to request “make-ready” from the utilities. This step is expensive and consumes several months. This is followed by construction of the distribution network, connection of customers, and commencement of services.

Omar Smith of Readsboro is gathering information about potential hub locations in each town which would house network electronics and from which connections would be extended to each premise.

The Communications Committee completed an attractive redesign of the website at a new web address, DVFiber.net.

Stephan added that the new website includes all meeting notices, minutes, and other information. He noted that Laura Sibilia has been actively involved and helpful to the District and supportive in the legislature to urge the state to support the development of CUDs. In addition, the Public Service Department’s technical liaison, Rob Fish, has been very helpful.

David noted that a statewide association of Vermont CUDs has formed and is led by the Chair of ECFiber, the pioneer CUD. The purpose of this group is to support development of new CUDs and to advocate for the interests of CUDs.

The ECFiber Chair reported to the Association that ECFiber has set up a 501c3 organization to solicit charitable donations that can be used to subsidize broadband subscriptions for lower income households that participate in the School Lunch program. The 501c3 structure was needed because

some charitable foundations are chartered to donate to nonprofits but not to municipalities. The organization will be operated as an experiment in the coming year to see if it is a viable idea. If so, the structure could be emulated by other CUDs. The scope might also expand to include subsidies for lower income senior citizens who need access to telemedicine resources. The outcome of this experiment will be followed closely by our CUD and others because we are keenly aware of the issue of broadband affordability. Stephan asked if the organization would also be funding laptops. David suggested that schools may be the source of laptops.

David added that Ann Manwaring was pleased to report the amount of volunteer effort that is being dedicated to the District. At least a half dozen people were engaged in the Northern Borders grant application. Three committees have active working members. An organizational consultant is working to more clearly define roles and responsibilities. Stephan noted that the District has been run exclusively by Volunteers.

Tristan added that our Committee is ready to mobilize when more local effort is needed to generate subscription commitments. David said waiting to initiate the pre-subscription campaign is like watching paint dry but that this may begin in a few months. The pre-subscription campaign will be a key input into our mapping study.

David reported that Consolidated Communications has advised Brattleboro that it intends to build a fiber network in many sections of town that have cable now but that this network will not be extended to hundreds of locations in that town. This is consistent with Consolidated's announced plan to deliver fiber to 1 million locations in Northern New England, following a plan they call Success Based Investment, Near Net Expansion, and Edging Out Our Network. These words mean that Consolidated looks to invest where there is the greatest revenue potential relative to the necessary investment. They have made it clear that they intend to compete with cable where it exists. We don't expect they will extend these new investments into our lower density rural towns where there are no cable providers.

We will study how many miles we need to construct, how many customers we can get, and therefore what costs and revenues we can expect. We will study this at a micro level to make the best use of our topology and learn how the financial plan can be made to work. Tristan asked how the pole study and the mapping relate. David said the pole study is a parallel effort that will inform the network design.

New Business

None.

Oher Business

None.

Hearing of Visitors

Doug and Marilou Parkhurst reported that the Matrix pole surveyor came to Fowler Road. One of the poles on their road has been damaged by a recent storm and has a red label affixed. There is a big crack and the telephone repair tech said the red label means they are forbidden from climbing the pole. No

one on the call knew how the process for replacing the pole but we agreed it would make sense to replace it before the make-ready process begins.

Doug asked how many CUDs have formed in Vermont and whether they will be competing for the same resources. David said that nine CUDs are established now. ECFiber Northeast Kingdom is the largest with 32 towns. ECFiber, which has been established for over 10 years, has 30 towns. CVFiber, sandwiched between NEK and ECFiber has 20 towns. DVFiber is the next largest, with 19 towns. We could well add a few more. Some Northern towns of Windham County won't join because they have fiber now from Vermont Telephone company. DVFiber is nearly double the size of Southern Vermont CUD based in Bennington. We may find ways to collaborate to gain the benefits of increased scale.

Doug asked if CUDs can cross state lines. David said that CUDs are formed under provisions of Vermont law. Unlike towns in Massachusetts and other states, Vermont towns are prevented from investing their own funds in broadband infrastructure. This is helpful for Halifax because we are not placed at a disadvantage compared to other Vermont towns. Also, Massachusetts has a state program that pays a substantial portion of each town's investment. Vermont does not have a tax base to support such a program. Tristan said the fiber technology can certainly cross borders.

All CUDs will be requesting guarantees from the Vermont Economic Development Authority (VEDA). DVFiber is currently the third largest. The next legislative session will focus on whether VEDA has enough funds to distribute and whether the current limit on VEDA loans, \$4 million, should be increased. Another factor of competition is that all CUDs and projects in other states will be competing for fiber supplies and trained labor. ECFiber has reported its costs have increased substantially compared to a few years ago.

Doug noted that when the Halifax Electric Coop was formed in the 1950s, volunteers went door to door to solicit subscriptions. David suggested that there may be a way to include a Historical Society presentation in the campaign to generate pre-subscriptions for the network.

Adjournment

Stephan moved the meeting should adjourn. Cara Cheyette seconded the motion. All present agreed. The meeting was adjourned at 7:57PM. The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, December 16.