

MINUTES
MIFFLIN COUNTY INTERNET ADVISORY COMMITTEE
BROADBAND EXPANSION KICK OFF CONFERENCE CALL
MARCH 20, 2019
MIFFLIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE, MEETING ROOM B – 3:00 P.M.

ATTENDANCE:

MEMBERS:

Clint Aurand, Armagh Township
Doug Cunningham, Mifflin County School District
John Rhone, Wayne Township
Kristen Ritchey, Comcast via teleconference
Kay Semler, Mifflin County Planning Commission
Mike Tate, GME Communications
Gene Wolfkill, Geisinger

OTHERS:

Alyssa Burd, The Sentinel
Lori Comp, Senator Corman's Office
Steve Dunkle, Mifflin County Commissioner
Chastity Fultz, Mifflin County Planning and Development Office
Bill Gomes, Mifflin County Planning and Development Office
Jeff Hackenberg, Penn State Extension
Brad Kerstetter, Juniata County
Kevin Kodish, Mifflin County Commissioner
Scott Kramer, SEDA-COG
Mark Long, Representative Benninghoff's Office
Liz Lose, Centre County Planning via teleconference
Phil Lucas, Mifflin County 911
Robert Postal, Mifflin County Commissioner
Cristy Schmidt, Penn State Extension
Jason Weaver, Rural Broadband Coop
Eric Welty, Noovis via teleconference

Call to Order: Bill Gomes called the meeting to order at 3:32 p.m. and reminded everyone to sign the attendance sheet. Everyone introduced themselves.

Approval of Minutes: Kay Semler motioned to approve the January meeting minutes. Mike Tate seconded the motion. All members voted aye.

Update on Noovis Contract: Eric Welty of Noovis provided a brief update to the committee. He spoke with Mark Van Ouse of Nittany Media who shared that they have worked with other providers to expand service. Mr. Welty stated that it will take a team to expand internet service. He is currently honing in on Decatur Township and has discovered Nittany Media has dark fiber along the Route 522 corridor in Mifflin County. He is planning a site visit on Friday, March 22nd. Mr. Welty also spoke to Jason Weaver of Rural

Broadband Cooperative and deferred their discussion to Mr. Weaver. Mr. Welty intends to attend the April 17th meeting and will share preliminary findings at that time.

Jason Weaver, Rural Broadband Cooperative: Bill attended a meeting that Jason Weaver, President of Rural Broadband Cooperative, held in February in Belleville to discuss internet service in the Mill Creek area. He also met Mr. Weaver at a broadband summit held by Representative Benninghoff last year. Bill discovered that Mr. Weaver is in discussions with the Southern Alleghenies with eight counties interested in participating in the Rural Broadband Cooperative. Bill is interested in Mr. Weaver's actions because the cooperative is in place and service could potentially impact the SR 655 corridor.

Mr. Weaver explained that the Rural Broadband Cooperative is a grassroots ambition with a backwards business model. Potential members approach the cooperative for service. The cooperative then assesses the community to determine what they could do. Mill Creek has raised and spent money directly on the project. The cooperative is non-profit and all money goes back into the customers and servicing the customers.

American Towers has recently reduced costs from \$3,000 to \$600 per month to obtain space on their towers for WISPs (Wireless Internet Service Providers). Mr. Weaver acknowledged that towers are not beneficial for all, but they can help with backhaul required for internet service. The Rural Broadband Cooperative will deploy the most cost effective service, which could include fiber, fixed wireless, tv white space and 365 frequencies.

The cooperative has rallied \$35,000 with 20 active members currently. This money has been invested into carving off the mountain top, building a concrete vault and tower base, and purchasing a tower with zero labor cost. The talented staff on the coop consists of RF engineers, structural engineers, a retired superintendent from HRI, a web developer and a retired Communications Director from Norfolk-Southern. They are currently \$15,000 - \$16,000 away from erecting the tower and broadcasting service.

Mr. Weaver is also working with Sascha Meinrath, CIC and Neopartners. Traditionally, a two to three year study is done before a project is started. By this time frame, technology is older. He is hoping to gather better data, which was collected through Sascha Meinrath. He will work with Neopartners through a package titled "Community Quick Start" to look at areas at a 30,000 foot view in order to map the area with FCC data in order to demonstrate a buildout package. Mr. Weaver can use the detailed information he obtains from Neopartners to apply for funding. Neopartners charges \$1,000 in administration fees plus \$0.40 per resolved customer and you pick the customers. Cambria County used this methodology and identified 6,500 individuals after eliminating those who have access to services such as Comcast and Atlantic Broadband. Neopartners has importing capabilities, such as including access to service, which can yield better results. CIC will then help develop a study to show the actual build. CIC will validate the solution provided by Neopartners using RF propagation and clutter data with topography.

Kay Semler asked if it has been determined how many customers they will service. Mr. Weaver stated that there are 20 founding members who donated \$1,500 each and commits sweat equity for work and/or meetings. There are additional 3-4 partner members who donated \$3,000, but can't contribute sweat equity. Mr. Weaver is keeping a running list of potential customers who want service, which contains approximately 160 names.

Mr. Weaver has worked in telecommunications since he was 17 years old, both inside and outside work, and feels his entire career has lead him to this cooperative. He became involved in this cooperative because his brother cannot get internet service and a group decided to solve the problem themselves.

The Rural Broadband Cooperative's tower will be placed on Stone Mountain and will cover Stone Creek Ridge and McAlevys Fort. They hope to place their next tower at McAlvey's Fort. The tower on Stone Mountain will have a line of site of the entire Route 655 corridor. Mr. Weaver is picking up internet from KINBER and microwaving it to Stone Mountain. He is hoping to signal Jack's Mountain with the Stone Mountain tower. Phil Lucas has restrictions at that tower in Allensville though.

Kay questioned whether there is any local government involved in the cooperative. Representative Rich Irvin or a representative of his office has attended the meetings. The county commissioners have been very helpful with support. Mr. Weaver does not want to be tied to a local government, but does chair Southern Alleghenies Broadband Task Force. Bill questioned what a potential relationship between the cooperative and Mifflin County would be. Mr. Weaver understands that counties have to go through a bidding process and cannot just give money to the cooperative. He envisions county support to include providing individuals who can join the cooperative or possibly loaning grant writers or services to the cooperative. Mr. Weaver recommends discussing how the county wants to bridge the gap between what the committee wants to do and actually doing it and also obtaining money and deploying it. This could change the direction the committee is going. Cumberland County bid a service area and gave the company ten years to have service to all customers. They are in the third year and currently have 600 customers at a charge of \$3,000/customer, which is very expensive. He does not want to repeat this and acknowledged the bidding process does not always work the way we want.

Scott Kramer mentioned DRIVE in Montour County, which is doing something similar to Mr. Weaver's efforts. They utilized four towers to provide service in rural areas. They are not up and running yet, but have a list of customers ready to sign up for service. This model is being used in different places. They are a local government and partner with providers to utilize backhaul. This makes the network an open network and allows for anyone who wants to provide service. Mr. Weaver related that he is currently using unlicensed radio service. Bill added that DRIVE needed someone willing to help with financing and equipment and utilized Geisinger for financing and Connex to implement the system. Mr. Kramer went on to explain that Lackawanna County used the same technology to expand their network and link county offices. Providers were brought in to help local businesses. They are not serving residents.

Bill recently spoke to Sheri Collins of the Governor's Office. She is still checking the reliability of data they previously collected. He also added that Mifflin County looked at the issue globally and we still do not have a financial source to encourage providers to expand service. Mr. Weaver is open to support, but Bill is unsure if the county can buy into the cooperative since the county does not want to own equipment.

Kay asked what type of service the cooperative will provide, as well as consistency and quality of the service. Mr. Weaver responded that the network will be engineered to 99.99% reliability rate. If an individual falls outside of this range, they will be notified. Phil Lucas questioned the capacity of the service and how good is the connection versus how reliable is the connection. Mr. Weaver responded that 120 Mbps will be available on a 1:1 ratio with the equipment he is using on the tower, but plans on 5-25 Mbps usage in order to meet the FCC guidelines. Mr. Weaver, however, feels the FCC guidelines are overstated. The cooperative will educate customers and allow them to understand what they really do need. Clint Aurand questioned the final costs to the end user. Mr. Weaver stated that the equipment will be \$325, which covers a one-time application fee to the cooperative. A fund will be created to help those who

cannot afford installation. They will also have speed at a humanitarian level at speeds of 1 Mbps for free, which an individual can sponsor and purchase equipment. Billing will be based on usage, similar to electricity. He estimates an average household of four usage of 190 gigabyte of data per month. The average Huntingdon County household has 2.7 members. Based on this information, he estimates a bill of around \$45 - \$80 dollars per month. Some things will be blocked and members will have to agree to the bylaws of the cooperative. There will be no caps placed on customers who can control their own spending. The accounts can be set up to receive an email or message when they reach certain levels of usage.

Other Business: Scott Kramer recently went to Perry County to share the DRIVE model and opened up discussions with Juniata and Mifflin Counties to discuss where the counties want to go with next steps. The first meeting will be to invite commissioners, planners and 911. He recognized that we need to determine what we have and what is available in each county. He would like to look at the DRIVE model to utilize the vertical assets of each county to establish a system based on wireless to hit rural areas since urban areas are pretty much covered.

The most recent provider map was displayed. Mr. Weaver stated he has information on all tower heights and fiber, which runs the entire 522 corridor in Mifflin County. Further discussion included locations of towers in the county and where potential service could be provided. Mr. Weaver added that his cooperative will overlap other providers despite not having a goal to not compete. He also feels the county should do a better job of tracking these types of assets in the future and the county should know where the fiber is located. Phil Lucas stated this is usually with PennDOT, not the county level. Mr. Weaver also acknowledged that Verizon has inspected all of their poles and attachments and has documented all pertinent information, but this information is a trade secret.

Next Meeting: April 17, 2019

Adjournment: The meeting adjourned at 4:45 p.m.