Broadband Study Committee (BSC) Meeting Notes

Date: June 27th, 2022

The meeting was held virtually, on Zoom.
Committee Members Present: Sean Powers, Sean Daly, Bob Espindola, Cathy Melanson, Tom McAffee, Alyssa Botelho

Committee Members Absent: None

Town Staff Present: Derek Frates.
Consultants Present
       Entry Point -Jeff Christensen
       Guest - Joshua Eichen, Mass Broadband Institute
       Guest - David Robertson – Lewis, Young Robertson & Burningham

The meeting was called to order at 6:35 PM.

Cathy Melanson made a motion to adjourn at 7:28, Sean Powers seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Meeting notes submitted by Bob Espindola were reviewed. Cathy Melanson motioned to approve the meeting notes, Tom McAffee seconded, there was no further discussion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote.

Josh Eichen, from Mass Broadband was introduced by Sean Powers.

He provided an overview of what the State was involved with. He said there are a lot of moving parts and final clarity is not available yet.

He asked if there was anything specific to talk about.

Bob Espindola asked what types of opportunities were eligible for funding. Bob mentioned one specific project that could use a staff person (the project with the Community Compact Cabinet)

ARPA and Infrastructure funding. ARPA will be the first out the door, $50M digital equity fund that covers literacy, device access, wifi, pretty broad and encompasses everything that is not infrastructure.

Expecting solicitations out in the near term.

Following those will be capital projects funds in ARPA category, through Mass Broadband and US Treasurery Department. Will likely be used to connect buildings that do not have a broadband service provider, so "unserverd" population. This should be 1st or 2nc quarter of 2023.

Meeting notes submitted by Bob Espindola

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Inrastructure funds will be next and will fall into several buckets as outlined below.

1) Massachusetts Digital Equity Act –provides resources for Digital Equity planning. Gives state an opportunity to build a strategy, that will then be administrated by MBI. Will take one year so probably September 2023 funds will be available.
2) Broadband Equity Access Deployment. Under NTIA. National mapping where requisitioning data nationally to indicate service availability. Will drive funding decisions. Will be public information.
3) Massachusetts doing own statewide mapping for same or similar data, to be able to compare with national data.

There will be a 270 Day planning schedule.

Reliability threshold is 100 MB over 20 MB.

Reliability concerns will be secondary to funding underserved population.

There will be an opportunity for the State, Private interests to challenge national mapping which is why having our own local data is important.

The Middle Mile Grant program will be run by NTIA. MBI will not touch that process.

Sean Powers and Jeff Christensen mentioned that Fairhaven had a CCC grant for housing authority tie in. Jeff asked if the Town would be able to use funding from MBI to support that project

Sean Daly asked if MBI had any thoughts on cases like Fairhaven where there are monopolies.

Josh said this would be tackled through planning activities, that MBI would study the landscape and take comments from stakeholders.

Bob Espindola mentioned that the grant program is aimed to provide service to underserved populations but that others in the community were interested from a financial benefit standpoint and an Economic Development standpoint.

Josh Eichen mentioned that there are Federal opportunities that tie in with Broadband and Economic Development. He also mentioned that coordination of existing road work to see where Broadband infrastructure can be laid in at the same time would be helpful.

Bob Espindola mentioned that the CCC program awarded resiliency grants to some communities so that is another area that was funded and in Fairhaven there are resiliency issues related to our coastal location and that there may be an opportunity to think of how Broadband might be an element related to the new Waste Water Treatment Plant project currently planned in Fairhaven (this is a parrellel to one CCC grant mentioned).

Bob mentioned that the Town could use funding for staffing a position to manage the Project Management and Outreach related to the CCC Grant and asked if that would be eligible through MBI funds.

Meeting notes submitted by Bob Espindola

Josh said he recognized this sort of opportunity and suggested that might be an eligible use once the final plans are announced but could not say for certain at this time. He said that he would suggest talking to SRPEDD to elevate this opportunity on a regional basis. He also suggested seeing if a local Health Care provider might have an interest as they try to push toward more remote services. He said they might be a good partner in this area. He suggested public health professionals in Fairhaven might be a good resource also.

Jeff Christensen asked what Josh thought the Regional Planning Agencies (RPA's) involvement might be. Josh indicated that RPA's provide technical services for planning and he said he could see RPA's. He said that the role could vary widely depending on the Town's own available planning staff, etc but that RPA's are accustomed to the type of planning that would be required to study and implement a regional plan for broadband.

Bob asked about how the planning might relate to an example like the Towns CCC grant program.

Josh indicated that SRPEDD would not even need MBI funding for that type of work and that they could provide it through their own Division of Local Technical Services program.

Bob Espindola suggested that there be a smaller subset of the Broadband Committee to meet with SRPEDD to see if there would be interest in helping the Town through the DLTA program/

Sean Powers asked if Bob and Town Administrator could take that step. Bob indicated that the Town Administrator would be too busy to participate at this time.

Bob said he would reach out to SRPEDD about the prospects of them supporting Grant Administration and Project Management and outreach.

Jeff Christensen suggested that a meeting with Town Counsel and/or Richard Manly would be helpful to discussing next steps to make sure there was a clear direction on the issue of using an Enterprise Fund.

There was a discussion about next steps. Bob Espindola indicated that he had requested a line item on the next Select Board meeting to discuss next steps in terms of Town Meeting Votes on Articles 34 and 35.

Jeff Christensen suggested that Fairhaven might want to see if MBI would consider funding an expanded project to the CCC project where instead of funding just service to one or two Fairhaven Housing Authority properties to instead incorporate service to all buildings.

Jeff said that he had talked to Housing Authority Director and she was interested in incorporating smoke sensors into the planned Broadband service to help curb illegal smoking in the FHA apartments.

Bob said that his take on MBI funding for infrastructure is a year out and wondered how this would impact the thought about expanding the scope of the CCC grant.

Jeff Christensen mentioned that MBI has concern about spending the full $50M on just digital literacy and may be looking for more.

Sean asked if the grants that are available could be posted on our website. Bob indicated he would work to get them from Josh Eichen and forward them to Derek Frates for that purpose.

Meeting notes submitted by Bob Espindola

David Robinson asked if there was anything likely to be included in the fall Town Meeting for Broadband. Bob indicated that timing would be too short, based on what is in front of us.

The next meeting will be scheduled after Bob Espindola has had the "next steps" meeting.

Cathy Melanson made a motion to Adjourn at 7:35, Tom McAffee seconded, there was no further discussion. The vote by roll call vote was unanimous.

Meeting notes submitted by Bob Espindola