

# Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes

Meeting Details: Thursday, July 25, 2024

6:30 pm – 8:03 pm

Lincoln County Service Center (801 N. Sales Street Merrill, WI 54452), Room 255/257/260  
and via Google Meets (online)

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**Attendees (16 total):** Tom Backen, Bill Bialecki, Chris Crawford\* (Charter), Phil English, Lydia English, Sara Guild, Gary Hartwig, Mark Leonard\* (PSC), Heidi O'Hare\*, Gordan Sennet, Travis Spoehr, Patricia Voermans\*, Carla Weisenfeld, Earl Welker\*, Lisa White\*, Ken Wickham (BB Chair)

*\*Participated online (6 total)*

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## 1. Call Meeting to Order – 6:30 pm by Wickham

Quorum = 9 (Bialecki, Guild, Hartwig, O'Hare, Spoehr, Sennet, Voermans, Welker, Wickham)

## 2. Introductions

Wickham introduced Guild as the new Executive Director for the Lincoln County Economic Development Corporation. Guild's background includes supporting broadband expansion efforts in Marathon County while chairing its Economic Development Committee from 2018-2022.

## 3. Determine and Adjust Broadband Commission Quorum Requirement

Attendees discussed adjusting the current self-imposed 9-member quorum requirement, noting that member attendance has been a challenge in past meetings. Suggestions included providing more widespread communication, putting more action-oriented items on the agendas, and/or creating a core group of commission members who are expected to attend and count towards quorum while continuing to keep meetings open to all interested parties.

**ACTION:** By consensus, it was agreed that Wickham, Guild, Bialecki, and Voermans would form an action team to assess the idea of creating a core group of Broadband Commission members and will bring a recommendation to the next Commission meeting. Activities should include sending out a notice to the current Broadband Commission email list to assess interest in participating in the proposed group.

## 4. Approve April 25, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Bialecki/Voermans motioned to approve the April 25, 2024 minutes as presented; motion carried.

## 5. Election for Vice Chair and Secretary

The Vice Chair and Secretary positions are currently open. Attendees agreed to table a vote to permanently fill the positions until after a decision is made on forming a core membership group next month.

**ACTION:** Bialecki/Hartwig motioned to appoint Welker as temporary Vice Chair and Guild as temporary Secretary effective immediately, with their temporary terms ending at the next Broadband Commission meeting; motion carried.

## 6. Charter RDOF Update

Crawford shared a map outlining the Charter RDOF project zones, noting that Charter is on track to put fiber to the home (FTTH) in 14 of Lincoln County's 16 towns by early 2026. The next zone to be completed (MF07e) is on the west-central border of Lincoln County and should be done by October 2024. A series of additional projects in the southeast corner of Lincoln County are slated to be completed by the end of 2024, and most remaining zones should be completed in 2025. Residents with questions or concerns about the installation process can contact Broadband Commission leadership, who will connect them with Crawford to help address their issues.

Attendees discussing reaching out to the towns to once again encourage them to pursue a PSC Broadband Forward! designation, which can help incentive and expedite future broadband expansion projects. Leonard processes the Broadband Forward approval letters and clarified that, while application fees must be under \$100, permit fees must simply be “reasonable.”

#### **7. USDA Broadband Technical Assistance Program**

[https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs\\_services/telecommunications-programs/broadband-technical-assistance-program#overview](https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs_services/telecommunications-programs/broadband-technical-assistance-program#overview)

Wickham asked Guild to share information related to this technical assistance grant opportunity so the Commission could determine if it would be worth pursuing to help with its broadband expansion efforts. After listening the Guild’s summary, the Commission decided not to pursue the funding for the following reasons: 1) Efforts could only focus on a limited section in the southwest corner of the county that was not already covered by Charter’s RDOF projects; 2) the August 20<sup>th</sup> timeline would be difficult to meet, especially without a project idea already identified; 3) prior BTA awards tended to go towards very large and/or consortium projects; and 4) the issues that still need to be resolved using technical planning will likely be addressed as part of the BEAD grant application projects that will be submitted later this year. Therefore, the Commission agreed to continue to focus on supporting BEAD-affiliated efforts at this time.

#### **8. Lincoln County BEAD Grant Application Strategy and Process**

Leonard reported that the PSC is currently reviewing the Challenge responses; 4 challenges were submitted in Lincoln County. Once that is completed, the state’s BEAD plan will be sent to the NTIA for final approval; there is no firm timeline for getting a response. The PSC plans to open the Letter of Intent process for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in August. This will be followed by four rounds of project bids designed to incentivize fiber installation while also maximizing the impact of the available funds. The overall goal is to achieve a plan for broadband expansion covering all remaining areas of the state within the next year.

Wickham and Spoehr have begun reaching out to ISPs to discuss their BEAD project ideas and identify opportunities to support all broadband expansion efforts. Leonard emphasized that the Lincoln County Board will need to pass an official resolution endorsing all project applications within its boundaries; evidence of support and engagement by towns and community anchor institutions will also be crucial.

#### **9. Next Meeting Time/Date and Agenda Topics**

- a. The next Broadband Commission meeting will be held on August 22<sup>nd</sup> at 6:30 pm.
- b. MEETING AGENDA TOPIC REQUESTS:
  - i. Provide a recommendation for developing a core membership group
  - ii. Presentation about the new Digital Equity Grant (Leonard)
  - iii. Add a Public Comment or General Updates section

Welker recently spoke with a Frontier representative who indicated they do not have any plans to expand their service in his area unless the town wants to add a digital café and pay Frontier \$500+/month. He also heard that Bug Tussel might be coming into Lincoln County starting in the northeast corner but has not been able to verify this information; Wickham will reach out to his Bug Tussel contact.

#### **10. Adjourn – Meeting adjourned at 8:03 pm by Wickham**