

# Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes

**Meeting Details:** **Thursday, September 26, 2024**

6:30 pm – 8:40 pm

Lincoln County Service Center (801 N. Sales Street Merrill, WI 54452)

Room 255/257/260

**Online Access:** <http://meet.google.com/cyt-wxgo-nsq>

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**Meeting Attendees (17 total):** Tom Backen, Brittany Beyer (UW-Extension), Jennifer Bishop\*, David Kranig, Sara Guild\* (Secretary), Gary Hartwig, John Heckendorf, Renee Krueger\*, Todd Kruse\* (Frontier), Mark Leonard\* (PSC), Clyde Nelson, Travis Spoehr, Chet Strebe, Carla Weisenfeld, Earl Welker (Vice Chair), Lisa White\*, Ken Wickham (Chair)

*\*Participated online (6 total)*

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

Commission Starting Quorum = 13 members

**2. Welcome & Introductions**

Wickham led introductions online and in the room.

**3. Public Comment**

Bishop relayed a request on behalf of the Lincoln County Towns Association to have someone from the Broadband Commission give a presentation at the Oct. 17<sup>th</sup> Towns Association meeting in Russell; Wickham will work with Bishop to finalize plans for attending.

**4. Approve Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes – August 22, 2024**

Hartwig/Welker motioned to approve the August 22, 2024, minutes as presented; motion carried.

**5. Commission Chair Updates**

Wickham deferred his updates to share them under the relevant topics later in the agenda.

**6. Digital Equity Grant Application Update**

Following the August meeting, Guild reached out to multiple entities to assess if any other organizations were applying for the Digital Equity grant and would benefit from having an additional partner. Those that responded said they did not intend to apply, and Guild did not pursue it further. She noted that despite not applying for the grant, this was a positive exercise because many potential partners in the region are now aware that Lincoln County is willing to collaborate on future regional broadband-related projects.

**7. PRESENTATION: UW-Madison Extension Broadband Team Information & Resources**

*Presenter: Brittany Beyer, Community Economic Development Specialist*

Beyer shared a PowerPoint presentation detailing various components of the BEAD funding process and explained how the UW-Madison Extension Broadband Team can assist communities with their application efforts. Key highlights included timeline clarifications, community engagement recommendations, and clarity on how to strategically develop county resolution endorsements. Beyer also shared various tools and other resources designed to assist communities with BEAD and other broadband expansion efforts.

Beyer and Leonard jointly answered BEAD-related questions. BEAD applications must be submitted by the ISPs, who must provide a 25% match (cash and/or in-kind). ISPs must give public presentations in the

towns where their projects are being proposed. There will be three rounds of applications, and no funding allocations will be finalized until all PSC-identified project areas have been claimed/covered. All ISP plans must then be approved by the NTIA in mid- to late 2025. This process has been designed to help ensure the goal of achieving statewide internet service coverage can be reached using the limited funds available.

## **8. Public Service Commission (PSC) Updates**

### *a. BEAD Program*

Most updates were covered under the prior presentation. Leonard highlighted the new FAQs document created by the PSC to help clarify the BEAD scoring criteria for community engagement and county endorsements. Welker noted that Starlink satellite equipment is now eligible to be included in BEAD proposals and asked if funding will be available for 5G cellular infrastructure expansion; Leonard confirmed there is intent to build out more cellular infrastructure.

## **9. Internet Services Provider (ISP) Updates**

### *a. Charter RDOF Project Implementation Updates*

Crawford was unavailable so Spoehr shared an updated RDOF map with notes showing anticipated future buildout projections. Two projects are scheduled to be activated yet this year, while multiple others should begin in January 2025. If residents are curious about a specific address, they should contact Guild, who will help them get an update from Charter.

### *b. Other ISP Updates*

Kruse reported that Frontier has transitioned away from copper and is focused on building/selling fiber service. They will be submitting a letter of intent to apply for BEAD funding but cannot commit until the project areas are confirmed. Kruse also encouraged residents who would like fiber internet access to register their address at [frontier.com/myfiber](https://frontier.com/myfiber), as this helps Frontier prioritize installation areas. He explained some of the challenges ISPs must negotiate when executing broadband expansion projects, such as coordinating 14 different permits for a single project or dealing with equipment and labor shortages. He also stated that a current installation project along Hwy 64 may not be as sporadic as it appears, noting that it is possible technicians are connecting or replacing current infrastructure, not simply installing new. He is available for one-on-one sessions to discuss resident-specific questions.

*8:00 pm – Krueger, Leonard, White left meeting*

## **10. Lincoln County BEAD Applications – Potential Activities & Opportunities**

### *a. Community Engagement Strategies*

Wickham will attend the Towns Association meeting in October to share information about BEAD, with an emphasis on the need for community engagement and town letters of support. He will try to identify some methods for connecting ISP representatives to the towns when the time comes.

### *b. County Board Resolutions*

Wickham will create a resolution for the Lincoln County Board. He will bring a draft resolution to the October Broadband Commission meeting for review before presenting it at the Administrative & Legislative Committee in early November. It will then go to the full County Board in mid-November.

## **11. Annual Tax Mailing Inserts Discussion**

Attendees discussed ideas for broadband-related information to share in the December 2024 tax mailings. Concerns were raised about the timing, cost, and lack of critical content.

Kruse Out – 8:20 pm

The Commission could not identify any critical information that could be shared in December and would justify the time and expense of creating tax mailing inserts. It will skip this opportunity for 2024.

## **12. Broadband Commission Organizational Guidelines**

- a. *Confirmation of Action Team Members*
- b. *Review & Possible Approval of Guidelines Document*

The updated Organizational Guidelines were included in the packet. Changes included adding an annual review every June, allowing all attendees to participate in meeting discussions with Chair approval, and having staggered 3-year terms for Action Team members. It also listed 8 out of the 9 Action Team members; Wickham is still awaiting confirmation from the final member.

**MOTION 1:** Welker/Backen motioned to approve the Broadband Commission Organizational Guidelines as presented, including the 8 Action Team members as listed; motion carried.

**MOTION 2:** Nelson/Welker motioned to keep Welker as Vice Chair and Guild as Secretary until the October meeting when all Action Team members would be present; motion carried.

## **13. Action Team Member Updates & Inquiries**

Welker shared the following updates and information:

- The low-income internet subsidy has ended but the FCC chair is still trying to install internet on all school buses;
- Starlink has a new program called Residential Lite that offers its services for as little as \$30/month; it is not yet available in the United States;
- Amazon is launching satellites this year to compete with Starlink;
- Verizon is in the process of acquiring Frontier, which may impact Frontier's future activities;
- Spectrum had a significant 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter loss that may be partially due to the loss of the subsidy. They have now updated their program fees and have also committed to sending out same-day maintenance service for all issues reported before 4 pm.

## **14. Future Meeting Topic Suggestions**

Wickham will bring a draft County Board resolution to the October meeting.

Welker suggested including a Digital Literacy/Education/Skills discussion at a future meeting. Beyer recommended including agencies such as the local libraries, ADRC, and/or United Way in this discussion. Attendees agreed this should be explored after the BEAD projects are finalized and the county has a better understanding of where and what information will be needed by residents.

## **15. Confirmation of Next Commission Meeting Date/Time/Location**

The next Lincoln County Broadband Commission meeting will be held on Thursday, October 24, at 6:30 pm in the Lincoln County Service Center; online access will be provided.

The November meeting date conflicts with Thanksgiving and will be rescheduled.

## **16. Meeting Adjournment** – Meeting adjourned at 8:40 pm by Wickham