

Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes

Meeting Details: Thursday, April 24, 2025

6:32 pm – 8:27 pm

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

County Board Room (#255/257/260)

Online Access: <https://meet.google.com/bjz-oiso-gpx>

Action Team Attendees (8/9 total): Tom Backen* (Vice Chair), Jennifer Bishop*, Sara Guild (Secretary), Clyde Nelson, Heidi O'Hare*, Amanda Patterson, ~~Gordan Sennet~~, Earl Welker, Ken Wickham (Chair)

Other Attendees (5 total): Bill Bialecki (Lincoln Co), Andrew Caylor* (MAPS), Travis Spoehr (Lincoln County IT), Chris Stark (UW-Extension), Chet Strebe* (NTC)

**Participated online (5 total)*

1. Call to Order – 6:32 pm by Wickham

Action Team Quorum = 8 (Backen, Bishop, Guild, Nelson, O'Hare, Patterson, Welker, Wickham)

2. Welcome & Introductions

Wickham introduced Stark from UW-Madison Division of Extension's Broadband team, then led attendee introductions in the room and online.

3. Public Comment - NONE

4. Approve Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes – March 27, 2025

Nelson/Welker motioned to approve the March 27, 2025 minutes as presented; motion carried.

5. Monthly Updates from LCBC Leadership & Partners

a. Commission Chair

Wickham and Guild are meeting with NTC's Dean of Agriculture, Utilities & Transportation next week to discuss potential opportunities related to utility installation technician training programs and job demand.

b. Public Service Commission (PSC)

Leonard shared this month's PSC updates with Wickham and Guild via email ahead of the meeting:

- BEAD Round 1 decisions were released to the ISPs earlier that day but will not be made public; Round 2 will begin soon. The PSC will continue to execute the BEAD program as originally approved by NTIA unless updated guidance is provided by the federal government.

- PSC's Digital Equity Capacity Grant application is open until May 20th. The program has two tracks, one for digital navigators and one for digital opportunity coalitions. Interested parties should contact the PSC.

- The PSC Digital Opportunity Mini-Conference was held online earlier that day. Guild shared some highlights from the program, which featured a presentation from the NDIA Deputy Director, a grant writing panel that included Sarah Lawrenz from Bertram Communications, a discussion about how the Racine area implemented a digital navigator program, and a panel sharing ideas for building a broadband coalition.

c. Internet Service Providers (ISPs)

i. Charter RDOF Project Implementation

An updated timeline for the RDOF installation project was sent to Guild shortly before tonight's meeting; she will provide an updated map/timeline along with the meeting minutes and online. Charter is also waiting to see which locations are included in the BEAD program project awards before deciding if/when it will expand service to the Alexander Lake Road area.

ii. Other ISPs – NONE PRESENT

d. *Action Team Members*

Welker questioned if BEAD program funding was being impacted by the federal funding freezes. Guild and Stark stated that because Wisconsin does not need to release any funding until after the BEAD contracts are approved and signed this fall/winter, the current BEAD program application activities can still move forward as planned for now. Any issues related to the release of BEAD funds are expected to be resolved by fall.

Welker also asked why Starlink is now included as a BEAD program option despite concerns that it offers lower quality service. Wickham and Guild clarified that the Round 1 applications did not include Starlink, but that it can now be included starting in Round 2, noting that there is not enough funding available to provide fiber service to all BEAD-eligible properties so alternative technologies such as satellite and towers are expected to be necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of bringing highspeed internet service to all homes.

Patterson reported that Merrill Area Public Schools is working with the T.B. Scott Free Library and the Merrill Police Department to set up a cybersecurity training program using the library's digital literacy grant funds. The program will take place before May 31st, which is the end of the grant period.

NOTE: Discussion on Topic #7 took place next so that all Action Team members could be present.

6. Digital Asset Mapping Presentation & Discussion (*took place AFTER Topic #7*)

Starck shared background information related to other digital asset mapping projects he has assisted with at the local and state levels. Attendees brainstormed a list of agencies that might be involved in digital resource utilization and/or assistance. They also discussed the pros and cons of participating in a multi-county digital asset project, ultimately deciding to complete a local assessment first, then look for opportunities where regional collaborations make sense.

7:20 pm – Strebe Out

Attendees shared ideas related to gathering and organizing a digital asset mapping system and considered the different types of information and questions that would be relevant to this project.

7:40 pm – Nelson Out

Additional discussion was held regarding the purpose of digital navigators, the impact AI might have on digital navigation services, and options for funding digital navigation services. Attendees also considered the kinds of information they would likely need when exploring options to assist residents facing digital resource access issues.

The Commission agreed that community engagement will be crucial in identifying the current status of digital resource access issues and opportunities. UW-Extension staff will work with the LCBC Executive Team to gather examples of surveys and public outreach efforts from other communities that could be adapted for use in Lincoln County. A summary of these examples will be shared at the May meeting. The LCBC will also create a project timeline and goals during the next meeting, potentially using the NDIA's recommended "3 points" as a guide.

7. Review of Lincoln County Broadband Commission Guidelines & Proposed Action Team Members

This topic was included to allow for a preliminary review of the current LCBC Guidelines and Action Team document ahead of the mandatory reviews in May and June. There were no recommendations for changes to the guidelines or Action Team structure. Nelson and O'Hare confirmed they are willing to renew their Action Team positions for another term; Wickham will contact Sennet to verify if he wishes to be reappointed. Executive Committee members will also be voted on at the May meeting. Wickham requested the May agenda also include the annual review of the official Lincoln County Broadband Plan.

8. Future LCBC Meetings Information

a. *Future Agenda Topic Suggestions*

May meeting topics will include: Action Team member vote; review of the Lincoln County Broadband Plan; update on the BEAD program Round 2 applications; and a discussion about the timeline, goals, and community engagement options for the digital resources assessment project.

b. *Confirmation of Next Commission Meeting Date/Time/Location*

The next Lincoln County Broadband Commission meeting will be held on Thursday, May 22, at 6:30 pm in the Lincoln County Service Center; online access will be provided.

9. Meeting Adjournment – Meeting adjourned by Wickham at 8:27 pm.

Minutes Approved: 06/19/2025 by LCBC, recorded by SG