

Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes

Meeting Details: Thursday, October 24, 2024

6:30 pm – 8:16 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>

Action Team Attendees (5/8 total): Tom Backen (Vice Chair), Sara Guild (Secretary), ~~John Heckendorf~~, ~~Clyde Nelson~~, ~~Heidi O'Hare~~, Gordan Sennet, Earl Welker, Ken Wickham (Chair)

Other Attendees (10 total): Brian Arndorfer, Jennifer Bishop*, Andrew Caylor, Todd Kruse* (Frontier), Mark Leonard* (PSC), Amanda Patterson, Kassie Soukup* (Bertram), Travis Spoehr, Pat Voermans*, Carla Weisenfeld

*Participated online (5 total)

1. Call to Order – 6:30 pm by Wickham

Action Team Quorum = 5 (Backen, Guild, Sennet, Welker, Wickham)

2. Welcome & Introductions

Wickham led introductions around the room and online. He welcomed first-time attendees Kassie Soukup from Bertram Communications and Amanda Patterson and Andrew Caylor from Merrill Area Public Schools.

3. Public Comment – NONE

4. Approve Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes – September 26, 2024

Welker requested an amendment under item 13 to reflect that Verizon is still in the process of purchasing Frontier. Welker/Sennet motioned to approve the Sept. 26, 2024 minutes as amended; motion carried.

5. Commission Chair Updates

Wickham, Spoehr, and Guild recently met virtually with Bertram Communications reps to discuss their interest in submitting a BEAD application for sites in Lincoln County. During the meeting, the reps shared information about Bertram's history, abilities, and capacity for expansion. Soukup confirmed that Bertram is very interested in applying due in part to the County's close proximity to other counties that have or will have Bertram infrastructure.

Wickham attended the Lincoln County Towns Association meeting on October 17th to share information about broadband expansion efforts, the BEAD program, and how towns can engage in internet expansion process. 10 towns were represented at the meeting and attendees expressed a lot of interest in supporting future expansion efforts.

6. Broadband Commission Action Team Roster Updates

a. Final Action Team Member Nomination/Approval

Wickham recommended nominating Jennifer Bishop from the Town of Bradley as the ninth and final member of the Broadband Commission Action Team.

MOTION: Guild/Backen motioned to approve Bishop as the final Action Team member; motion carried

b. Executive Team Members Nomination/Approval

With all Action Team members now confirmed, Wickham requested nominations for the Executive positions.

CHAIR: Guild/Sennet motioned to approve Wickham as Chair of the Broadband Commission; motion carried

VICE CHAIR: Wickham/Welker motioned to approve Backen as Vice Chair of the Commission; motion carried

SECRETARY: Wickham/Sennet motioned to approve Guild as Secretary of the Commission; motion carried

7. Internet Services Provider (ISP) Updates

a. Charter RDOF Project Implementation Updates

Crawford was traveling and unable to join the meeting; no update provided.

b. Other ISP Updates

Frontier: Kruse provided clarification on Verizon's pending acquisition of Frontier, noting that the public statement indicates Verizon will be buying both Frontier's assets and the legal entity. The transition is expected to take approximately 18 months.

Frontier is still waiting to see the final BEAD project units but will likely focus around its current footprint, although it is possible the projects could extend beyond those areas depending on circumstances.

Bertram: Soukup noted that Bertram is also still waiting to see the final project units and encouraged the Commission to keep communication lines open throughout the BEAD process.

8. Public Service Commission (PSC) Updates

a. BEAD Project

Leonard shared the following updates/information:

- The NTIA is still completing the Challenge Process review
- The PSC posted new data information on its website earlier in the day that may help ISPs match to project units.
- Round 1 applications are expected to open next Friday, Nov. 1, with a submission deadline of December 18th.
- The PSC's BEAD FAQs page has been updated with more information.
- 35 ISPs submitted Letters of Intent; 9 have been approved to date

Wickham expressed appreciation for the new county-specific maps identifying the BEAD-eligible addresses, noting the Lincoln County map has been very helpful when communicating about broadband efforts.

9. Lincoln County BEAD Application Considerations

a. Anticipated Timeline and Action Items

The Round 1 application process is still on track to open next Friday (Nov. 1); project units will also be released at that time. The submission deadline is not expected to be pushed back beyond Dec. 18.

Wickham shared the timeline information with the Towns last week and also provided them with a sample Letter of Support to help expedite their part of the community engagement process.

b. County Board Resolution Draft

Wickham shared a draft County Board resolution that he based on the sample provided by UW-Extension. Due to the timing, the final version of the resolution will likely not go before the full County Board until its December 17th meeting. However, he intends to bring the draft approved by the Commission tonight to the County's Administrative & Legal Committee in early November to make them aware of the project and get feedback as well as a preliminary review from legal counsel. The current timeline should allow the Broadband Commission to provide additional feedback on the final resolution(s) during its November meeting.

Attendees recommended two small changes to the draft:

- 2nd Whereas: Replace "Americans" with "residents" or remove word
- 7th Whereas: Remove "a stablished"

Discussion was held regarding the options for supporting multiple ISP applications within the County. The Commission may choose to meet in closed session next month to discuss the different ISP proposals and determine if/how to support each one to best serve the county's needs overall.

MOTION: Backen/Welker motioned to approve the draft resolution with the two recommended amendments to the 2nd and 7th Whereas statements; motion carried.

c. *Project Budget Match Contribution Options*

Wickham and Guild clarified that ISPs must include a 25% match (cash and/or in-kind) as part of all BEAD project budgets. Local governments are not required to contribute to the match but it is expected the ISPs will ask them to help offset costs in some capacity to demonstrate “skin in the game” and make the projects more financially feasible. Lincoln County and the towns do not have the cash reserves to support these projects so Wickham asked attendees to brainstorm options for in-kind match contributions. Ideas included:

- Reduce/remove fees for town or county permits
- Streamline processes for approving permits, granting right-of-way access, and comparable timing issues
- Use county/town staff in place of ISP staff for appropriate activities
- Provide free/reduced storage space for ISPs to store project materials
- Share local intelligence/knowledge about area-specific issues that could impact installation plans

Much discussion was held debating the various ideas. Due to the challenge of not knowing which options would be most beneficial without having the project details, the Commission will offer to work with the ISPs during their application development process to identify opportunities for support relevant to their projects. Commission members will also try to work with the impacted towns to create Point of Contact lists enabling ISPs to reach key people that can quickly address issues that may arise during the installation process.

7:26 pm – Caylor departed (during mid-point of Match discussion)

d. *Community Anchor Institutions Engagement*

A key component of the BEAD process is connecting Community Anchor Institutes (CAIs) to high-speed internet service. CAIs may include schools, libraries, and voting locations. Members discussed the benefits of including CAIs in community engagement, including having them submit letters of support. Schools and hospitals will be asked to provide letters with relevant impact data, such as the number of student/patient household addresses that align with BEAD project areas.

10. Action Team Member Updates & Inquiries

Welker requested clarification on Charter installation activities in his town that appear to be happening near addresses identified as “BEAD Eligible” on the map. Attendees briefly discussed possible reasons for this activity.

Wickham asked Patterson to speak about her observations related to the impact of internet service on Merrill Area students. She expressed her enthusiasm for the work of the Commission and shared that at this time, the schools cannot send internet-dependent devices home with students to complete schoolwork because so many households lack access to connect the devices. This limits what the teachers can do to educate the students. The schools are also starting to see a gap in learning between students who did not have internet access during the Covid crisis and those who were connected. She will speak with Caylor and others at the MAPS district to try to get data on how many students are in BEAD-eligible households. She will also reach out to her Tomahawk school district counterpart to encourage them to provide this information, as well.

11. Future Meeting Topic Suggestions

The November meeting will focus on reviewing the ISPs’ BEAD project proposals as of that date and may include closed-session discussions if appropriate. The Commission will also continue to assess ways to provide in-kind support for the projects using the resources available.

12. Confirmation of Next Commission Meeting Date/Time/Location

The next regular meeting date falls on Thanksgiving. Attendees agreed to move the meeting date to Thursday, November 21st, at 6:30 pm in the Lincoln County Service Center; online access will be provided.

13. Meeting Adjournment – Meeting adjourned at 8:16 pm by Wickham