

# Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes

**Meeting Details:** **Thursday, August 22, 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>

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**Meeting Attendees (17 total):** Patrick Anderson\* (Charter), Brian Arndorfer, Tom Backen, Jennifer Bishop\*, Nathan Brost\*, Chris Crawford\* (Charter), Sara Guild (Secretary), John Heckendorf, Renee Krueger, Mark Leonard\* (PSC), Clyde Nelson, Heidi O’Hare\*, Travis Spoehr, Pat Voermans\*, Earl Welker (Vice Chair), Lisa White\*, Ken Wickham (Chair)

*\*Participated online (8 total)*

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

Quorum = 10 (Arndorfer, Backen, Bishop, Guild, Heckendorf, O’Hare, Spoehr, Voermans, Welker, White, Wickham)

Arrived after call to order = Nelson (6:34 pm), Krueger (6:36 pm), White (6:36 pm)

## 2. Welcome & Introductions

Wickham led introductions and welcomed first-time attendee Brost representing CESA 9 (education).

## 3. Public Comment

Welker shared the following comments:

- The issue he reported last month involving the Bug Tussel tower in his town has been straightened out.
- 88 local governments have adopted the PSC’s broadband ordinance, and he questioned why Lincoln County has not yet done so. Wickham said it was explored in the past and he and Spoehr are currently revisiting this issue to see if adjustments can be made so the County will consider adoption.
- Per recent articles, the ISP Brightspeed has been awarded \$3.7 billion to build fiber networks across the nation and he would like to explore reaching out to this company if possible; article can be viewed here: <https://www.fierce-network.com/broadband/exclusive-brightspeed-gets-whopping-37b-new-financing-build-fiber-networks>

## 4. Approve July 24, 2024, Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes

Voermans/Welker motioned to approve the July 24, 2024, minutes as presented; motion carried.

## 5. Commission Chair Updates

This month’s meeting agenda includes some proposed new topics, including a monthly Chair update.

Wickham recognized Guild’s assistance with Commission-related activities during the past month.

6:36 pm – White/Krueger arrive

Wickham and Spoehr met with local representatives from three ISPs this month (Charter, Bug Tussel, and Frontier) to discuss their BEAD project interests and plans. The local ISPs reps were not able to confirm any specific details related to plans for BEAD project applications at this time but they shared valuable information clarifying the processes and factors influencing how projects may be selected. Wickham emphasized the importance of building relationships with ISP providers early in the planning process.

North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (NCWRPC) is receiving a Spark! Award from the American Planning Association’s Wisconsin Chapter for their work on the Lincoln County Broadband Plan. Wickham had submitted a letter of support for the application on behalf of the Commission. The award recognizes outstanding planning-based projects with budgets under \$25,000 that successfully leveraged community engagement to achieve a significant positive community change that has a long-term impact.

The PSC has officially issued a notice for ISPs to submit their BEAD Letters of Intent; these will be due in early October.

## 6. Broadband Commission Organizational Updates

### a. *Update on Contact List Outreach*

Guild sent two emails this month asking the approximately 150 people on the Broadband contact list to confirm their desire to continue receiving communications by the end of August. 50 people have confirmed their continued participation to date, and Guild has attempted to collect additional information related to their location and/or specific interests to help with targeting future communications. Seven people have been removed from the list and 90 remain unconfirmed. Of those, 35 have provided only email addresses and they will likely be removed at the end of August. 15 are Town Clerks or Chairs; attendees asked Guild to keep these on the list even if they do not request continued communications. Guild and Wickham will review the remaining unconfirmed people on the list next week and reach out to anyone who has not responded but is affiliated with an entity that would likely be beneficial to keep engaged, such as local governments, schools, etc.

### b. *New Agenda Items*

This month's agenda includes some proposed new topics based on feedback during last month's meeting, including a Chair Update, Public Comment, and Action Team Member updates.

**Public Comment** is intended to allow all attendees to share thoughts on agenda items early in the meeting as well as communicate suggestions/requests related to internet expansion issues. Discussion cannot occur during Public Comment to ensure no decisions happen on items not on the agenda. However, all attendees will still be allowed to participate in discussions on any agenda items scheduled during the meeting with Chair approval, in keeping with past practice.

**Action Team Updates** will provide an opportunity for Action Team members to bring forward general updates, questions, or ideas on internet-related issues they have engaged in since the last meeting. Limited discussion may occur but no decisions or significant topic discussions should take place unless they are noticed on an agenda. If staff or other attendees have topics they would like addressed under this item, they must ask an Action Team member to bring it forward.

**Future Meeting Topic Suggestions** provides an additional opportunity at the end of the meeting for all attendees to recommend items for public discussion at a future meeting.

Attendees agreed by consensus to keep these items on future meeting agendas; they will adjust them as deemed appropriate in the future.

### c. *Organizational Guidelines Proposal & Action Team Implementation*

Wickham reviewed the new Organizational Guidelines document prepared by Guild with guidance from Wickham and Voermans as well as information from past meeting minutes and discussions. The document's goal was to create a succinct guideline for running the Commission that includes official mission, vision, and goals statements.

The Guidelines also include an outline for creating a new Action Team, per the direction given at the last meeting. The proposed Team is comprised of 9 members with two-year terms who may vote

and count towards a 5-member quorum. Executive Team members must come from the Action Team and will have one-year terms starting in May of each year. Six people have accepted Action Team positions to date – Wickham, Guild, O’Hare, Welker, Backen, and Nelson. Wickham is still waiting for confirmations to fill the final three positions.

**ACTION:** Voermans/Arndorfer motioned to approve the Organizational Guidelines with the addition of a mandatory annual review every May. Discussion was held related to the composition of the Action Team, including clarifying that a minimum of 3 members should be Towns representatives; other members should represent the County Board, EDC, education, and business at a minimum. Attendees recommended changing the membership terms to be staggered three-year terms with three member terms ending each May to minimize the risk of a large membership turnover.

**MOTION:** Nelson/Backen motioned to postpone a vote on the Organizational Guidelines until the next Broadband Commission meeting to give the Chair more time to finalize the remaining Action Team members and to allow Guild time to update the Guidelines to reflect the recommended change to staggering the Action Team terms; motion carried.

**MOTIONS (Exec Team):**

Voermans/Nelson motioned to elect Welker as Vice Chair until the next meeting; motion carried  
Welker/Voermans motioned to elect Guild as Secretary until the next meeting; motion carried

## 7. Public Service Commission (PSC) Updates

### a. *Digital Equity Grant*

Leonard defined “Digital Equity” and shared the history related to recent federal Digital Equity funding efforts. Round One was a Digital Equity Planning Grant ([INFO](#)) and Round Two was a Digital Equity Capacity Grant ([INFO](#)); this is currently underway. The final round is the Digital Equity Competitive Grant ([INFO](#)), which are now open and being administered by the NTIA. This grant’s goal is to “fund initiatives that ensure communities have the access and skills to fully participate in the digital world, regardless of their background or circumstances.”

The grant application is due Sept. 23; details can be found in the [Notice of Funding Opportunity](#). Grant awards are anticipated to be announced no later than April 2025 and are expected to be given to projects with budgets between \$5-12 million with a 10% match (cash or in-kind). Projects will run a maximum of four years.

Due to the size of the awards, applicants are encouraged to submit multi-organization projects. Wood County may be pursuing a grant; Mary Ann Lippert is their contact. Grow North and/or Centergy may also be aware of proposed projects in central/northern Wisconsin. Tomahawk and T.B. Scott libraries recently submitted Flexible Facilities Program grant applications for digital access enhancements at their facilities; FFP grant decisions are expected in October. Brost is not aware of any digital equity projects being pursued in the CESA 9 region.

### b. *BEAD Funding*

The PSC anticipates completing the BEAD Challenge review process and submitting the results to the NTIA for approval next week. ISP Letters of Intent are being accepted now through October 1<sup>st</sup>.

Leonard shared a preliminary timeline for the BEAD application process steps through August 2025.

BEAD project units will not cross county lines but there could be multiple units within a single county.

Multiple ISPs attended a PSC Broadband Stakeholders meeting earlier today to discuss the BEAD application process and ask questions. The PSC will be updating and releasing BEAD FAQs on its website that reflect information from this meeting.

The PSC is not currently planning to provide any standardized language for county resolutions; however, UW-Extension's Broadband Office may be working on something related to this. Guild and Wickham will look into inviting a UW-Extension representative to the next meeting.

Leonard emphasized the importance of obtaining and recording formal community support for projects from local governments and Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs), including holding public meetings to garner support where official minutes are taken and writing letters of support based on verifiable community input. Endorsements will be needed prior to the end of the year so communities are encouraged to begin the process now to avoid delays due to the holidays. The Commission will discuss community outreach ideas at its next meeting.

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

Crawford and Anderson shared the current Charter RDOF project map. Project units are based on census blocks and do not follow county lines. White blocks have been completed; most are in/near the City of Merrill. Blocks outlined in purple are in the queue for installation in the next 18 months; Charter is currently working on getting permits and otherwise preparing for construction in these areas. Anderson and Crawford will send the map with additional timeline details to Guild and Wickham. All timeline estimates are subject to change based on extenuating circumstances.

Heckendorf asked if Charter has any plans to bring internet to the new subdivision in Pine River. There are 100 homes with no broadband service and Charter's line is ¼ mile away. Crawford asked the Commission to send him the location details so he could look into this request.

Charter's local team is working on a BEAD Letter of Intent but still needs corporate approval and may not be able to commit until the project units are released. They will be looking for county support. Leonard recommended endorsements be specific to each ISP project and noted that multiple endorsements for the same project unit may dilute the impact of the endorsement.

#### **9. Action Team Member Inquiries/Updates Related to Broadband Expansion Activities**

Welker reminded the committee that last year broadband letters were included with the annual tax notices and asked if they would be doing something similar again. This will be discussed at the next meeting.

Welker also asked Wickham to help confirm if the Bug Tussel tower in Schley is just a relay tower, and encouraged people to reference the BEAD Challenge Map (<https://maps.psc.wi.gov/apps/BEADChallengeMap>) as a good resource for learning about the current internet options available in a specific area.

Voermans would like to get more information from ISPs who are interested in completing BEAD projects in Lincoln County and recommended the Commission extend an invitation to Brightspeed. Wickham will reach out to his Brightspeed contact to assess their interest in Lincoln County.

**10. Future Meeting Topic Suggestions**

- Keep Charter and PSC updates as standard agenda items
- Presentation from UW-Extension Broadband representative to discuss BEAD application processes
- Ideas for internet-related inserts/fliers to include with county tax statements
- Develop strategies for obtaining community support for BEAD applications
- Review updated Organizational Guidelines document
- Finalize Action Team members roster
- Digital Equity Grant application proposal (if participating)

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

The next Lincoln County Broadband Commission meeting will be held on Thursday, September 26, 2024, at 6:30 pm in the Lincoln County Service Center; online access will be provided.

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

*Minutes Approved: 09/24/2024 by LCBC, recorded by SG*