

Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes

Meeting Details: Thursday, January 30, 2025

6:30 pm – 8:50 pm

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

County Board Room (#255/257/260)

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

Action Team Attendees (9/9 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 (17 total): Brian Arndorfer, Jim Bertram (Bertram), Bill Bialecki, Chris Crawford* (Charter), Heidi Duley, Dave Dyer, Gary Hartwig, Renee Krueger*, Todd Kruse* (Frontier), Sarah Lawrenz (Bertram), Mark Leonard* (PSC), Travis Spoehr, Chet Strebe*, Tyler Verhasselt*, Pat Voermans*, Christine Vorpapel, Lisa White*

**Participated online (9 total)*

1. Call to Order – 6:30 pm by Wickham

Current Action Team Quorum = 7 (Backen, Bishop, Guild, Nelson, Sennet, Welker, Wickham)

Arrived after call to order = O'Hare (6:33 pm online)

2. Welcome & Introductions

Wickham greeted all attendees; introductions were postponed until Item #4.

3. Consideration of New Broadband Commission Action Team Member

Amanda Patterson was presented as a potential new Action Team Member. She is the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for Merrill Area Public Schools (MAPS).

MOTION: Guild/Nelson m/s to nominate Amanda Patterson to join the LCBC Action Team; motion carried.

4. BEAD Program Overview

Chair Wickham led introductions and shared a brief overview of the Lincoln County Broadband Commission's history and key activities. He highlighted the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) internet service expansion project currently underway with Charter/Spectrum, which will bring high-speed internet to more than 5,000 addresses across the county by the end of 2026. There are still approximately 3,000 addresses that are currently underserved with no active plans for receiving high-speed internet; these addresses are eligible to receive funding for internet service expansion through the federal Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) grant program. A map highlighting the approximate locations of these addresses was shared with attendees.

The goal of the BEAD program is to achieve "Internet for All" with an emphasis on fiber-level service. The Public Service Commission (PSC) of Wisconsin has been tasked with allocating approximately \$1 billion through the BEAD program under the guidance of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to ensure all Wisconsin addresses have access to reliable, affordable high-speed internet service by 2030. Applications must be submitted by internet service providers (ISPs) by Feb. 25 and must include a formal endorsement from the County Board as well as letters of support from impacted towns and community anchor institutes (CAIs) to receive full points.

Two ISPs will be presenting today – Bertram Communications (in person) and Frontier Communications (online). Each ISP will present for approximately 10 minutes plus 5 minutes for Q&A. After the presentations, attendees who would like to speak with Bertram privately can meet the reps in a separate room that has been set aside for that purpose; Frontier's rep is available for meetings via phone upon request. There will be a public comment period later in the meeting so attendees can share their thoughts related to which ISP(s) should receive the County endorsement. The Broadband Commission Action Team will make its decision in closed session towards the end of the meeting.

5. Presentations by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) on Lincoln County BEAD Project Proposals

Chair Wickham reported that he, Vice Chair Backen, Secretary Guild, and IT Director Spoehr met previously with all the applicants and received detailed information regarding their BEAD project proposals, including a list of the specific project units each ISP is proposing to cover; these lists cannot be shared publicly due in part to BEAD program collusion prohibitions. Today each applicant was asked to share key components of their BEAD projects along with relevant information about their companies and project goals.

PRESENTATION#1: BERTRAM COMMUNICATIONS

Sarah Lawrenz (*Strategic Partnerships Manager*) and Jim Bertram (*Owner/President*) shared information about Bertram's history and experiences implementing various internet service expansion projects, including recent projects in Door, Oconto, and Sheboygan Counties. Their BEAD proposal features fiber internet service using an Active Open Network (AON) system, which offers dedicated service to each household, unlike the more common GPON system's shared bandwidth; they also have wireless tower service capabilities but are not including this option in their initial application. They will provide free hook-up and service to all town halls and fire/EMS facilities located along their installation paths and offer tiered internet-only pricing plans to accommodate various levels of usage and budgets. Their proprietary technology is capable of 10 GB service and has been designed to scale up to meet future demand. They partner with Five Star Energy Service to hire local workers for installation whenever possible; they also use Wisconsin companies to make their equipment when feasible. Bertram has already received endorsements from Langlade, Marathon, and 14 other counties. If awarded, they anticipate having all projects completed within 36 months of signing the final contract.

PRESENTATION #2: FRONTIER COMMUNICATIONS

Todd Kruse (*Senior Manager, Government & Grant Affairs*) shared information about Frontier's proposal to install Fiber to the Premise (FTTP) service with speeds that are currently up to 7 GB but have the ability to reach up to 10 GB. He also shared Frontier's current pricing tiers, which feature bundles with additional services such as phone, TV, and streaming. Frontier is already offering fiber service in the cities of Merrill and Tomahawk; residents can subscribe online and should submit requests for service if it is not already available at their address. Kruse clarified that Verizon's acquisition of Frontier should be completed no later than early 2026, at which point Verizon will assume all of Frontier's assets and legal obligations, including any BEAD project contracts. He also noted that all BEAD projects must be completed by the end of 2029. Requests for additional information about Frontier's BEAD project and any letters of support can be sent to Todd.Kruse@ftr.com.

AGENDA ADJUSTMENT – Chair Wickham moved #8 PSC Update to this point to accommodate the PSC rep's schedule

8. Public Service Commission (PSC) Updates

The PSC will be opening the State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program in February 2025. Leonard will bring more information to the next LCBC meeting.

a. BEAD Project

Leonard reviews all BEAD county endorsements and letters of support. He reiterated that it is important to include the specific project unit areas being endorsed as well as the specific ISP(s) and any form of match being provided by the supporting entity. He offered to preview any letters or endorsement statements prior to submission and provide general feedback.

7:38 pm – Leonard Out

6. Prior Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meetings Records Review

a. Approval of Minutes – October 24, 2024

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

b. Review of Meeting Summary – December 19, 2024

Guild asked if there were any questions or changes for the December 2024 meeting summary; she noted that due to the lack of quorum, it was not considered an official meeting. There were no questions or changes.

7. Internet Services Providers (ISP) Monthly Updates

a. *Charter RDOF Project Implementation Updates*

Crawford reviewed the updated RDOF project implementation map, which showed that Charter expects to activate areas in the northeast corner of the County (near Woodboro), the southeast corner (near Pine River), and the west-central area during the first two quarters of 2025. Chair Wickham noted that residents may see orange conduit going into the ground in other areas of the county as part of Charter's preparations for future installation activities. Residents who want to know the estimated activation dates for a specific address can contact Guild and/or Wickham to get assistance.

b. *Other General ISP Updates* - NONE

8. **Public Service Commission (PSC) Updates** – Covered before #6 (above)

9. **Public Comment**

Vorpagel requested clarification on how to receive information related to BEAD and other County broadband activities. She was encouraged to visit the EDC's Broadband web pages (<https://www.lincolncountyedc.org/broadband>) and/or sign up for the LCBC email communications list by registering online or emailing director@lincolncountyedc.org.

Duley noted that her current internet service at her farm in Pine River through HughesNet is very poor.

10. **Consider a Motion to Adjourn into Closed Session, to wit: Deliberate on Recommending ISP BEAD Project(s) to Receive Formal County Endorsement**

MOTION: Nelson/Backen motioned to convene into closed session for the purpose of deliberating on a recommendation for the Lincoln County BEAD program ISP endorsement and to include all 8 in-person members of the Action Team as well as Hartwig, Arndorfer, Bialecki, and Spoehr; motion carried.

Closed session commenced at 8:02 pm following a 7-minute break.

11. **Reconvene Into Open Session; Take Action on Items Discussed in Closed Session**

At 8:40 pm, Wickham reported that the following motion had been taken in closed session:

MOTION: Guild/Welker motioned to return to open session; motion carried. All remaining in person and online attendees were welcomed back.

MOTION: Nelson/Backen motioned to have the Lincoln County Broadband Commission recommend that the Lincoln County Board of Supervisors endorse **Bertram Communications** as the sole preferred BEAD grant program internet service provider (ISP) for Lincoln County for all eligible project units and further directed the LCBC Executive Team to draft a County endorsement document and to coordinate all formal communications related to this recommendation.

Guild spoke in favor of the motion, sharing the following list of reasons to recommend Bertram:

- a. There is potential for Bertram to eventually serve all remaining un(der)served addresses across the county, which aligns with a key goal of the Broadband Commission;
- b. Bertram offers a high-quality, unique AON technology system;
- c. Adding this carrier will bring new internet service options to county residents;
- d. Town halls and fire/EMS facilities located along the installation paths will be connected and offered internet service at no cost;
- e. K12 schools may have the option to partner with Bertram to provide students who lack reliable internet service with limited access to the internet through a dedicated school-approved intranet system;
- f. Bertram's company and technology are set up to accommodate future growth and sustainability;
- g. They are dedicated to hiring local when feasible;
- h. Equipment will be made in Wisconsin when possible; and
- i. Neighboring counties have already demonstrated their support for Bertram.

MOTION CARRIED; Wickham will ensure the County Board receives a draft ISP endorsement statement for consideration at its February 17, 2025, meeting.

12. Action Team Member General Updates & Inquiries

Wickham noted that the USDA's Community Connect grant might be worth exploring and recommended bringing more information to a future meeting.

13. Future Meeting Topic Suggestions

The February 2025 meeting will include an update on the final BEAD grant submissions and information on the PSC's State Digital Equity Capacity and/or the USDA's Community Connect grants.

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

The next Lincoln County Broadband Commission meeting will be held on Thursday, February 27, 2025, at 6:30 pm in the Lincoln County Service Center; online access will be provided.

15. Meeting Adjournment – Meeting adjourned at 8:50 pm by Wickham

Minutes Approved: 02/27/2025 by LCBC, recorded by SG