

Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes

Meeting Details: Thursday, February 27, 2025

6:30 pm – 7:25 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 (6/9 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 (4 total): Jeff Barwick*, Andrew Caylor, Laurie Ollhoff, Travis Spoehr

**Participated online (3 total)*

1. Call to Order – 6:30 pm by Wickham

Action Team Quorum = 6 (Backen, Guild, O'Hare, Patterson, Welker, Wickham)

2. Welcome & Introductions

Wickham led introductions in the room and online.

3. Public Comment - NONE

4. Approve Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes – January 30, 2025

Welker/Patterson motioned to approve the January 30, 2025 minutes as presented; motion carried.

5. Commission Chair Updates

a. BEAD Grant Applications Update

Wickham confirmed that Bertram Communications' BEAD application was endorsed by the Lincoln County Board at their February 17 meeting and the appropriate documentation was subsequently provided to them. The Tomahawk Library and TB Scott Library sent Bertram letters of support, as well. Frontier Communications also requested letters of support from some community anchor institutions. Wickham has not seen either ISP's final application materials but assumes they were submitted prior to the February 28th deadline.

PSC rep Mark Leonard was not able to attend tonight's meeting but provided Wickham the following updates:

- BEAD Round 1 has now closed; the PSC hopes to complete its review of all applications by March 31st.
- BEAD Round 2 will open in April with an emphasis on covering all remaining service locations.
- The PSC is currently accepting Letters of Intent from providers who plan to propose using unlicensed fixed wireless and/or satellite services during BEAD Round 3, which will open in May or June.
- The BEAD program is continuing to move forward despite the current uncertainties about federal funding.
- UW-Extension is holding a webinar next week titled "*Broadband Deployment: Sharing Right of Way Assets with Existing Utilities*." All interested parties are encouraged to register. Wickham will be participating.

6. Internet Services Provider (ISP) Updates

a. Charter RDOF Project Implementation Updates

Charter's rep was not available but confirmed prior to this meeting that there have been no substantial changes since January's report. Area WS21E (west of Merrill) is on track to be completed this week. The current Charter RDOF map can be found on the Lincoln County EDC website under the Broadband page.

Wickham recently observed some utility work along Highway 17 but has not yet confirmed what it is.

b. Other ISP Updates – NONE

7. Public Service Commission (PSC) Updates

a. BEAD Program

Most PSC updates were covered under #5) Commission Chair Updates.

Guild added that the “Right of Way” webinar will be recorded so those who are unable to join next week can view it online at a later date. She will forward information about the webinar to the Broadband email list.

8. TB Scott Library PLA Grant & Digital Literacy Classes

Ollhoff reported that the TB Scott Free Library received a \$10,000 Public Library Association (PLA) grant in late 2024; the grant is being supported by AT&T. The funding is intended to help libraries provide and/or enhance digital literacy skills for their communities, and can be tied into courses from AT&T’s DigitalLearning.org platform.

TB Scott will be using their funding to run classes, purchase materials, train staff, pay instructors, market programs, provide meals and childcare for program attendees, and obtain additional digital items for the library inventory, including iPads, tablets, and/or laptops. Their goal is to serve 75 people; all funds must be spent by May 31, 2025.

The library has scheduled a series of digital literacy courses in March and April. The courses will cover a variety of topics including cybersecurity, iOS/Apple product skills, and protecting your children online. Details can be found online at www.tbscottlibrary.org/events. The library also has created a flier listing all available digital literacy courses.

Attendees discussed ideas for promoting the courses to help maximize participation, such as sharing course information with the Youth Justice Collaborative Committee.

9. Additional Broadband and Digital Literacy Grant Options

Guild shared information about four different grants related to digital literacy that are or soon will be available:

a. **State Digital Equity Capacity Grant** (*Public Service Commission*)

- i. Not yet open; PSC is still waiting on final guidance from the NTIA

b. **Nonprofit Access Grant Program** (*Public Service Commission*; reviewed PowerPoint slides from PSC)

- i. Due: March 6, 2025
- ii. Purpose: Enables nonprofit groups to apply for partial funding of programs or projects that will facilitate affordable access to telecommunications
- iii. Opportunity: The LCBC could support applications for area nonprofits already planning to apply for this grant in Lincoln County; interested parties should contact LCBC leadership ASAP.

c. **Lifeline Outreach Grant Program** (*Public Service Commission*; shared PowerPoint slides from PSC)

- i. Due: March 26, 2025
- ii. Purpose: Assist low-income customers in obtaining affordable access to essential telecommunications through the Lifeline program, which provides a discount to eligible low-income households on essential telecommunication service
- iii. Opportunity: This grant typically goes to larger projects led by organizations like 2-1-1 who are directly involved with the Lifeline program. However, the LCBC can watch for opportunities in the upcoming months and explore ideas to support an application in 2026 if the right project is identified.

d. **Community Connect Grant** (*USDA Rural Development*; flier provided in packet)

- i. Due: April 21, 2025
- ii. Purpose: Offers financial assistance to eligible applicants that will construct broadband networks that provide service on a community-oriented connectivity basis in rural areas
- iii. Opportunity: Most past awards are over \$1 million. LCBC could potentially support applications from ISPs or other partners looking to include Lincoln County as part of their grant project.
- iv. More info: www.rd.usda.gov/community-connect

Attendees briefly discussed ideas for finding and sharing information about these and other relevant grant programs with the appropriate persons and organizations, including using the Broadband email communications list.

10. Action Team Member Updates & Inquiries

Guild is planning to schedule a meeting with UW-Extension's Broadband reps to discuss ideas for additional actions the LCBC could potentially pursue in 2025 to remain proactive now that the BEAD program is underway. All LCBC Executive Team members will be invited to join this discussion. Feedback will be shared at the next LCBC meeting.

11. Future Meeting Topic Suggestions

- a. Update on the UW-Extension "Right of Way" webinar information
- b. Status on BEAD and RDOF projects
- c. Ideas for how the LCBC can remain proactive beyond supporting BEAD program activities

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

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

13. Meeting Adjournment – Meeting adjourned at 7:25 pm by Wickham

Minutes Approved: 03/27/2025 by LCBC, recorded by SG