AGENDA
Eau Claire County
Broadband Committee
Thursday, April 15, 2021
4:00 P.M.
Remote Meeting via Webex Events

Those wishing to make public comments must submit their name and address no later than 30 minutes prior to the meeting to rod.eslinger@co.eau-claire.wi.us. Comments are limited to 3 minutes; you will be called on during the public comment section of the meeting. Written comments will also be accepted and should be submitted to the e-mail address listed above.

Public Access: Dial in Number: 1-415-655-0001 Access Code: 145 162 0393, Password: dR4WbthrX88
*mute your device upon entry

1. Call to order and confirmation of meeting notice.

2. Roll Call

3. Public Comment (limit to 3 minutes per person)

4. Charter/Spectrum presentation on commercial and residential services in the County - **Discussion**.

5. Broadband Oral Progress Reports – **Discussion**

    a. County Board Meeting – April 7th
    b. Eau Claire County Towns of Association Unit Meeting – March 30th

6. America Rescue Act Fund **- Discussion/Direction**

    a. Potential partnerships opportunities between the county, towns, school districts, libraries, and local municipalities.

7. SpaceX Starlink Pilot Project Update – **Discussion/Action**

    a. Confirmation of Starlink participant list
    b. WEDC Grant
    c. Next Steps…

8. Telecommuter Forward and Broadband Forward Update – **Discussion/Action**

9. Healthcare position vacancy on the committee – **Discussion**

10. Review/Approval of March 25, 2021 Committee Minutes – **Discussion/Action**

11. Next Steps and future meetings – **Discussion/Action**

    a. Future Meeting: May 20, 2021

12. Adjourn

PLEASE NOTE: Upon reasonable notice, efforts will be made to accommodate the needs of individuals with disabilities through sign language, interpreters or other auxiliary aids. For additional information or to request the service, contact the County ADA Coordinator at 839-4710, (FAX) 839-1669 or 839-4735, TTY: use Relay (711) or by writing to the ADA Coordinator, Human Resources, Eau Claire County Courthouse, 721 Oxford Avenue, Eau Claire, WI 54703.

Oral Report to the Eau Claire County Board: Progress of the Eau Claire County Broadband Committee, April 7, 2021

Access to high-speed internet is a necessity to promote economic development, enhanced healthcare, education for all ages, increased agricultural productivity, and civic engagement. The mission of the Eau Claire County Broadband Committee is to serve as a collaboration and connection hub that works with citizens, businesses, industries, agriculture, units of government, and broadband providers to increase the availability, delivery, and utilization of high-speed internet* services countywide.

When we first starting meeting in August of 2019, we were thirsty for any kind of internet expansion. It seemed to me that we were meeting month after month to try to get a drink of water from a dripping garden hose.

Recently, we have had some successes and the future is looking very promising, almost overwhelming.

Two partners that we brought to the table submitted a collaborative grant to the state PSC office. These grants were selected for funding and this summer 24/7 and TriCounty Communications will lay fiber in all of Drammen Town. Next summer the residents will be able to connect to the internet with fiber to the premises installations.

24/7 also submitted a successful grant for a fiber extension down the Town Hall Road in Brunswick that will add 31 households, some businesses, the Brunswick Volunteer Fire Department, and the Brunswick Town Hall. A partner for this expansion was Eau Claire Energy Cooperative, which will benefit from fiber to one of its substations that monitors electricity consumption.

A third success is a pilot between Eau Claire County, Starlink, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, Eau Claire Economic Development Corporation, the three major medical providers (HSHS, Mayo, Marshfield), CVTC, Eau Claire Energy Cooperative, PESI Continuing Education, and the Augusta School District. This is a test of Starlink's "better than nothing" Beta rollout of their Low Earth Orbit satellite system that has become operational in parts of our county. This pilot is now fully funded and will pay for the initial equipment ($499), shipping, and one year of monthly fees ($99/month) for 30-50 households and businesses within the Starlink hexagonal target area south of Augusta. The Broadband Committee and the major partners are currently reviewing the 60 applications we have for this program.

A final success that is currently being developed is a Digital Literacy program that can support any county resident who wants to increase their ability to utilize high speed internet resources. A student group from Professor Scott Lester's Community Leadership course is putting the final touches on this program which will be launched sometime in August or September. We will recruit and train students who want to meet their Service-Learning graduation requirement from UW-Eau Claire, 4-H students who want to use the experience as a project that they can present at the annual 4-H County Fair, and any interested citizens. These digital coaches will be trained and matched with citizens who want to develop specific skills.

Looking ahead, and in just a few months, that dripping garden hose has become a fire hose flowing at full blast. There are several programs that have become law or are in the works that promise to expand broadband access to all citizens, especially our rural citizens and low-income families.

The American Rescue Plan (already law) has two provisions for broadband expansion, including $120.2 Billion coming directly to local governments and counties.

The Emergency Broadband Benefit Program (already law) will provide low-income households with a $50/month discount for eligible broadband and a one-time $100 reimbursement for laptops, computers, and tablets purchased through a qualified provider (such as 24/7).

President Joe Biden has proposed an infrastructure bill, The American Jobs Plan, that promises to deliver high-speed broadband to all Americans, including the 35% of rural Americans who are lacking access to broadband at minimally acceptable speeds.

Governor Tony Evers has declared 2021 as the Year of Broadband Access in Wisconsin and has proposed a biennial budget that includes a 200 million investment to improve Wisconsin's broadband infrastructure. By comparison, Senator Jeff Smith has noted that this is five times the amount invested in the 2013, 2015, and 2017 budgets combined.

There may be an even bigger boost for Broadband on the way. The House Majority Whip James Clyburn and Senator Amy Klobuchar have reintroduced the Accessible, Affordable, Internet for All Act. This is a 94 Billion act to expand high speed broadband, improve speeds where the internet is slow, and help families who are struggling to pay their monthly internet bills.

So, right now the Broadband Committee is trying very hard to keep up on all the rules and requirements for these programs, which have not yet been rolled out. We are also pursuing a strategic approach that will help us prepare applications in the future.

Our strategic approach, which we will discuss at the next meeting, is to:

*Collaborate across public and private sectors and reach out to bring new parties to the table, such as the Towns Association (state PSC noted the high level of collaboration and dollar match by the Town of Drammen for the 24/7 and TriCounty grant applications—we will need to collaborate with many different players getting funding from the ARP and other sources)

*Enhance our GIS-based broadband survey developed by Planning and Development staff to map and document our county-wide broadband coverage. Layers to the map that are existing or to be added would be areas of unserved need, underserved need, current provider coverage, broadband technology type, etc.

*Begin to develop or support the development of a technical analysis and cost estimates for broadband construction, equipment, and operations.

*Develop a business strategy.

*Create a grant checklist and start marking off the basics.

*Create a broadband coverage checklist and timeline and map our progress to our goal of 100% broadband access for county residents.

MEETING MINUTES
Eau Claire County
Broadband Committee
Thursday, March 25, 2021
4:00 P.M.
Remote Meeting via Webex Events

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Members Present: Lynn Thompson, Joe Alf, Donald Mowry, Tom Lange, Tim Laubach, Collin Pomplun, Luke Hanson, Mark Zuber, and Scott Hoffman.

Staff Present: Rodney J. Eslinger – Director of Planning and Development, Dave Hayden – Director of Information Systems

Others Present: Kathryn Schauf, Chris Meyer, John LeBrun, Doug Carlson

Press: Ryan Patterson

1. Call to order and confirmation of meeting notice.

    Chairperson Mowry call to order the meeting at 4:00 p.m. and he confirmed that the meeting was properly noticed.

2. Roll Call – Members present are noted above.

3. Public Comment (limit to 3 minutes per person)

    Doug Carlson, Town of Brunswick citizen, offered the following questions to the committee: What method or process is the Broadband Committee using to define the areas of greatest broadband deficit per household per square mile? In the Union and Seymour, where Starlink cells are already live, does the committee believe that Starlink service meets the need for those residents, or do they believe there is still a deficit to overcome for them? Will additional property owners be able to sign up for Starlink subscriptions in the pilot area or will they just serve the list up to 50 specific addresses that the committee provides them?

4. Review/Approval of March 25, 2021 Committee Minutes – **Discussion/Action**

    The committee reviewed the meeting minutes of March 25, 2021. Lynn Thompson motioned to approve the minutes as presented, Luke Hanson seconded the motion; motion carried on a voice vote with all in favor of the motion.

5. America Rescue Act Fund - **Discussion/Action**

    The committee and staff had a general discussion on the American Rescue Act and discussed connecting with our existing partners to learn how we can assist and collaborate on future projects

and to reach out to the school districts, towns, libraries, and other local municipalities all to ensure broadband expansion are coordinate in an efficient manner without duplicating efforts or missing out on opportunities. The committee did not want to narrow their options and noted proven technology should be a focus of the committee. Options maybe include but not limited to wireless vs. wired, short term vs. long term, and upload/download speeds. The group discussed the possibility of forming a task force in effort to collaborate across all entities to ensure we do not miss opportunities for funding or supporting a project. Once the funds are dispersed to the municipalities, each of them will have until December of 2024 to spend the money.

6. PSC Grant Announcements – **Discussion/Action**

   Three PSC grants were awarded for two broadband projects in Eau Claire County. Specifically, TCC and 24/7 were awarded grants to install fiber to the premise in the Town of Drammen, and 24/7 was awarded a grant in the Town of Brunswick on a smaller project along Hwy Z covering 30 residences, town hall, fire department, a few businesses, and an Eau Claire Energy Cooperative Substation. Mark Zuber indicated the Town of Drammen project will likely be completed over a two-year span.

7. SpaceX Starlink Pilot Project Update – **Discussion**

   Dave Hayden presented the updates to the committee on the survey, allocations, fundraising efforts, and the WEDC grant application process. At this time, staff have received 60 surveys or about 11.5 % return rate. Within two week, the final participation lists should be finalized and be available at the next committee meeting. Staff continues to work with Corporation Counsel regarding the agreement with the medical partners and work continues on the weekly survey that would include incentives for the participants.

8. FCC Emergency Broadband Program – **Discussion/Action**

   Don Mowry briefly updated the committee on the FCC Emergency Broadband Program.   He explained it is a program to help individuals that struggle to pay for internet/broadband services. A link to the program details will be shared with the committee after the meeting.

9. Next Steps and future meetings – **Discussion/Action**

   a. Future Meeting: April 15, 2021.

   Adjourn Action: Meeting adjourned by unanimous consent at 5:15 p.m.

   Respectively submitted by,

   Rodney J. Eslinger
   Director of Planning and Development