



**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY BOARD
BROADBAND TASK FORCE AGENDA**

County of Champaign, Urbana, Illinois

Tuesday, April 5, 2022 - 6:30 p.m.

Shields-Carter Meeting Room and Via Zoom

Brookens Administrative Center

1776 E. Washington St., Urbana

MINUTES – Approved as Distributed April 26, 2022

Members Present: Samantha Burnett (via Zoom), Samantha Carter, M.C. Neal, Kyle Patterson, Mike Smeltzer, Eric Thorsland and Brad Uken

Members Absent: Brad Passalacqua and Jacob Paul

Others Present: Sean Middleton and Doug Dawson with Finley/CCG Consulting, Darlene Kloepfel (County Executive), Mary Ellen Wuellner (Grant Writer) and Mary Ward (Recording Secretary)

Agenda Items

I. Call to Order

Mr. Uken called the meeting to order at 4:35 p.m.

II. Roll Call

Roll call was taken, and a quorum was declared present.

III. Approval of Agenda/Addendum

MOTION by Mr. Thorsland to approve the agenda, seconded by Ms. Carter. Upon voice vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

IV. Approval of Minutes

A. March 21, 2022

MOTION by Mr. Smeltzer to approve the minutes of the March 21, 2022 meeting, seconded by Mr. Neal. Upon voice vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

V. Public Participation

Rick Harnish, Director of Development, NextLink Internet, (aka AMG Technology Investment Group) They were the largest winner in the Connect America fund phase 2 grant from the FCC and were awarded \$281m some of which is for Illinois. In the RDOF funding program they were awarded \$429m. They are a presumptive winner as it has not been authorized yet. They have authorization by the engineering staff at the FCC and are awaiting the commissioner's approval. They plan to invest another \$400m for a total of \$1 billion investment for the states they were awarded in. They participate in the EBB and ACP programs to help consumers with costs. They have partnered with Eastern Illini Electric Coop (EIEC). They are building 500 miles of fiber to connect all of their substations together. At the substations they will be erecting monopoles to supply wireless broadband and will supply fiber in the future. They will also hold the AMI equipment for EIEC and will install IOT bay station on the towers. They hire locally and train staff and the average salary is \$71.5k including benefits. Have approval to build gigabit service.

Jason Young, Volo Internet & Tech, a local wireless and fiber provider. Wants inclusion of local business in this endeavor. They are active in rural expansion. They have resources and opportunities.

Tyler Evans, Director of Business Strategies, Stratus Networks, gave a brief overview of their company. They have their own network in several places in Illinois. They are looking for communities to partner with and to expand. Their plan is to bring fiber to every home at 1 gigabit of speed.

VI. Communications

There were no communications

VII. New Business

A. Strategic Consideration for Bring Broadband to Underserved Areas of Champaign County

1. Pages 13-20 of the Broadband Plan Report
2. Memo – Broadband Project Strategic Considerations

Doug Dawson with CCG Consulting spoke to the committee about the challenge of going from the document to action. It is a lot of work. He is in favor of a step-by-step approach. The memo in the packet is a great place to start as it lays out a lot of the steps.

Mr. Smeltzer raised the question of how RDOF may complicate our planning. Mr. Dawson said we need to consider and plan for both scenarios, if RDOF is awarded, and if it's not. It is a complication, and we need to have reasonable discussions to plan for what we want to do.

Mr. Smeltzer also asked about the percent of total project of county matching funds is a reasonable percentage. Mr. Dawson said it will come down to the cost per passing. If it's \$20,000 per passing they'll want more local match than if it's \$10,000 per passing. A lot will depend on how the State looks at it and hopefully, they'll give a lot of direction.

The Memo that came from Ms. Kloeppel and Ms. Wuellner are the major points as they saw them. Mr. Dawson thinks it's a great outline.

There are five major decision points in the outline. Mr. Uken would try to work through this as a whole to begin with and see how it goes. We may have to eventually break some of this down into sub-committees.

Discussion was held on the first point, what model is most favorable for the County. Mr. Smeltzer stated that he is in favor a public/private partnership. There needs to be one organization that's doing the grant and being sure the whole county is being taken care of. Having a central control on how this is put together makes sense. Mr. Thorsland asked for the pros and cons of a retail system vs. a public/private partnership. The study came up with the retail recommendation since this will mostly be grant funded. It all comes down to funding. RDOF does throw a complication into this decision. We can include this in the RFI to ask the ISPs for their opinion. What's the path to get this done to everyone's satisfaction? It's too early to pick one; we need to get more information to decide.

Ms. Kloeppel said she is getting requests to sign letters of support for ISPs. Is there risk for doing this? What are the pros and cons? If you don't support some of these, they might be missing out on smaller grants that will help fill an area. Some of the smaller grants could help take care of some areas before the Federal grants arrive. Mr. Uken stated that he wasn't sure we're quite ready to be signing off on these letters of support until we're a little farther along in the process. Mr. Smeltzer wondered if there is a way to incentivize the potential RDOF winner to move from wireless to fiber sooner or skip wireless altogether? Money solves a lot of problems. They might be willing to have that conversation.

Ms. Carter had a question about the RDOF maps in the report, if we wait to give a letter of support to the ISPs will that money be available later? What is the urgency to do these? RDOF winners have a long timeline, if they are awarded, to complete the project with checkpoints they must meet along the

way. Discussion continued as to if it is better to offer a letter of support and possibly have input into what is being done as the letter may help them obtain the grant funding. If there is no letter, they might lose out on the grant. Should letters of support only be written for fiber projects and not wireless?

Rick Harnish of NextLink joined the discussion to help answer some questions that arose during the discussion. The comment had been made that the RDOF areas look like Swiss cheese with areas not being covered by RDOF. They are obligated to serve the RDOF areas, but wireless doesn't know boundaries and will fill the holes in between the RDOF areas. Appreciates that we see that we can leverage RDOF to get more funding in the Connect IL grants. They are willing to do that, maybe up to 50% possibly. They have talked to the FCC, and where appropriate, they can go back and change their plan from wireless to fiber. Their plan is to move forward with wireless and then go back and build out the fiber network. Phase I is wireless to get people service as quickly as possible and Phase II is fiber. They are in a partnership with Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative, and they are committed to the project.

For point number one in the Memo, we agree that we have it narrowed down to points A (Retail Model) and C (Public/Private Partnership) are where we're at for now.

Discussion continued onto the second point about developing either an RFQ or RFI. As part of that, the report would be shared with the providers and they would have a good base of information to put together their plan. Mr. Dawson likes this approach. In another county he is working with they are asking the ISPs for maps for where they plan to serve, what technology they want to use and how much money do they want from the county. In the RFQ, you want to make sure all areas of the county are covered.

Mr. Thorsland asked if we are ready for an RFQ, or do we really need an RFI?

Is it realistic to stay within boundaries as written in the study? It would be good to have the data. The data and maps could be included in the RFI. It would be a good place to start.

There was general consensus that we are in support of doing an RFI using points listed in the Memo and using the maps from the study as a starting point.

The discussion then moved to point 3 on the Memo to determine a range of options for the County contribution. The ARPA budget was discussed for this year. \$3 million was budgeted for FY2022 and the consulting fee came out of that amount. The second ARPA installment has not yet been received but there was an understanding among the board that more funds would be coming for the broadband project, but no amount was discussed. Unofficially, there are discussions of possibly \$10-\$12 million in funds for broadband total, that includes the \$3 million for this fiscal year.

Mr. Smeltzer discussed and passed out a handout on Bond Funding and RDOF.

Mr. Smeltzer reminded the committee about the report from the Housing Authority earlier in this process. This study is all about rural Champaign County. The Housing Authority was looking to the County for funding to make broadband happen for their various facilities. It was mentioned that there are other Federal grants that are available specifically for these types of projects. The County may be asked to find some type of funding for these projects. The Housing Authority will be put on the next agenda.

Mr. Dawson said that we may need a sub-committee to be working on the other in-kind contributions, particularly items like right of ways, fee waivers, etc.

Ms. Kloeppe brought up the Statistically Valid Survey. She feels that this is something we need to be moving on soon and is checking with RPC to see if they are able to take that on. Mr. Uken asked how we would get a better response with this survey. They would need to do either telephone or a door-to-door survey and we would need to get to 500-800 responses to be valid.

Mr. Thorsland said they we should allow the Executive to get this started. The committee is in consensus on proceeding with the survey

RPC has the expertise to do this, Ms. Kloeppe is checking to see if they have the time to do this. If not, we may have to do an RFP to find someone to do this. Mr. Smeltzer suggested one the questions to include with the survey would be if people are willing to cooperate with the use of the right-of-way along their property lines if we need to run fiber. Mr. Uken felt this could be a tricky question to answer as there is a lot of nuances in how that happens but would be good to plant a seed.

Mr. Dawson said they are willing to help and will get us a proposal of what that might look like for the RFI.

VIII. Other Business

A. Date of next meeting

The date of the next is to be determined. Mr. Uken will work on coordinating the next meeting date to be held in the next 7 to 14 days.

IX. Chair's Report

There was no Chair's Report.

X. Adjournment

Mr. Uken adjourned the meeting at 6:20 p.m.

Please note the minutes reflect the order of the agenda and may not necessarily reflect the order of business conducted at the meeting.