

Broadband Capacity Building Task Force

Notes of Meeting, December 5, 2011, 1:00-5:00 pm

State Planning Office

19 Union Street, Room 110, Augusta, Maine

Attendees:

Task force members: Warren Cook (chair), Chris Jerome, Bob Montgomery-Rice, Allyson Handley, Edwina Ducker, Ken Fletcher, Ryan Pelletier, Peter Mills

Staff and invited speakers: Denise Garland, Phil Lindley, Lisa Leahy, Susan Corbett, Fletcher Kittredge, Amanda Rector, Frank O'Hara, Chuck Lawton, Dwight Allison

Warren Cook opened the meeting and welcomed all to the first full meeting of the Broadband Capacity Building task force. Following introductions, Phil Lindley, the Executive Director of the ConnectME Authority, offered his own welcome to the task force members.

Summary of orientation sessions

The staff from Planning Decisions, Inc. (Frank O'Hara and Chuck Lawton) gave an overview of the preliminary orientations sessions that were held with individual task force members. Some of the themes that emerged from these orientations were the pervasiveness of information and technological change and the desire to focus on game-changing policies. In a discussion around these ideas, the linkages between broadband, education, and economic growth were highlighted. The distinction between getting basic coverage to everyone (high quantity, lower quality) and getting very high speed coverage to select areas (high quality, lower quantity) is a key concept – both elements are important, but require different strategies with regard to infrastructure investment, consumer education and regulatory structure and policy to achieve and provide different benefits.

Examples of “game changing” policies

Planning Decisions, Inc. staff then proceeded to walk the task force through some examples of how government can influence broadband use through demand-side and supply-side policies. The best result occurs when both types of policies are implemented. Examples of opportunities for demand-side change are increasing the number of college courses that are online, providing teleservices to frail elderly in their homes, increasing e-government services, and using social networking as an economic development tool. Examples of supply-side opportunities are city-wide free or low-cost wifi and last mile infrastructure grants.

South Korea is an example of a country that has set ambitious goals for broadband availability, penetration, and quality and has seen success through its policies. Planning Decisions, Inc. will continue to identify best practices in this area and will provide additional examples of broadband leaders to the task force.

“Game changers” in Maine

The task force then heard from a panel of three businesspeople who are changing the way broadband works in Maine. Susan Corbett of Axiom Technologies opened by describing the challenge: 49,000 homes and businesses without broadband access in Maine and Maine's ranking of 43rd in the nation in terms of broadband adoption.

Dwight Allison of Maine Fiber Company spoke about the Three Ring Binder project, which is installing 1,100 miles of fiber optic cable throughout Maine. This dark fiber will then be leased primarily to telecommunications companies operating in Maine. In addition, the project will connect community anchor institutions such as libraries, town halls, medical centers, and schools.

Susan Corbett returned to describe what is being done with broadband in her region: Washington County Education and Employment through Sustainable Broadband Action. The farmers and fishermen portion of the project involves providing both technology and training to 10 fishermen and 10 farmers so that they are able to report in real time to the State and Federal governments. The nursing component links the College of Nursing and Health Professionals in Lewiston to Downeast Community Hospital in Machias, enabling nurses to engage in distance learning while staying within their local community. In addition, Susan described the Washington County Mobile Broadband Public Safety Pilot Project, which will provide real-time mobile connectivity to transmit data to public safety entities such as hospitals.

Fletcher Kittredge of GWI talked about using broadband to connect along the eastern seaboard and up through Canada to reposition Maine as a bridge rather than as the end of the road. The ability for Maine to serve as a route to and from Europe could be very valuable. Another technological development that could be valuable to Maine is cloud computing: both in terms of savings derived from moving to cloud computing and in terms of providing data center services. Maine could be a key location for data centers, but involvement from the State would improve the likelihood of attracting them.

Brainstorming

The last part of the meeting was spent in a wide-ranging brainstorming session, in which task force members, staff, presenters, and audience members discussed some of the key issues the task force should be considering. The task force was warned by Fletcher Kittredge not to underestimate the pace of technological change, as the definition of broadband will continue to change as the task force does its work. Susan Corbett suggested that getting past the barrier of funding is dependent on redefining broadband access as a necessity, rather than as a luxury. Education is also key – knowing what to do with broadband and how to do it will drive adoption rates. There was a great deal of concern that the current regulatory structure is holding Maine back. The importance of hearing from all different parties (including wireless and cable, for example) was emphasized.

The meeting concluded with suggestions for future agenda items, a request that task force members send agenda ideas that may occur to them to Warren, and a reminder of the next task force meeting on February 1, 2012.