**28 April 2021**

**Press Release**

**Broadband Grants Announcement**

The ConnectMaine Authority seeks Community Broadband Planning Grant applications from groups interested in expanding broadband service to their communities.

Broadband service enables civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning and access to essential services. These grants are funded through assessments or surcharges on certain communications, video and internet service bills. Along with other sources of funds, ConnectMaine anticipates awarding about $130,000 in this round.

Planning grants are awarded to develop plans for expanding the availability of broadband service, and to produce strategies for digital equity and inclusion. Municipalities, groups of municipalities, counties, or community organizations that provide local or regional economic development programs, are eligible to apply.

The planning grants program incentivizes collaboration among multiple communities, in part because the community planning process is a significant undertaking. Collaboration can bring additional resources, volunteers and community support to the planning effort, and it also improves the viability of eventual expansion of broadband networks in the area.

Communities that go through a community-driven broadband planning process are situated well to apply for future infrastructure grants. Significant federal and state funds are anticipated for broadband later this summer and fall, at both the state and local levels. Communities should take this opportunity and timeline into consideration as they outline their plans.

The planning grants program is designed to get communities ready to respond to these opportunities, by committing to firm milestones to expand broadband in a way that reflects the community’s vision and goals. Community-Driven Broadband Projects seek to widely expand infrastructure for equitable access to affordable and reliable internet service that meet the current and future broadband needs of Mainers.

More information and applications can be found on the ConnectMaine website: [www.maine.gov\connectme](http://www.maine.gov\connectme). Please direct any questions to ConnectMaine staff. The mission of ConnectMaine is to facilitate the universal availability of broadband to all Maine households and businesses, and to promote the valuable role it can play in enriching their lives and helping their communities thrive.

Planning Grants Application

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This application binder is for community broadband planning projects, which involve developing plans for expanding the availability of broadband service. Phase I projects are intended to begin the process of building community-wide support for expanding broadband service; Phase II projects are intended to take the community to the next step in planning for expanded broadband service. Other projects may be considered based on progress to-date, specific challenges, and the need and capability to overcome those challenges. Successful grant applications outline processes for producing the broadband plan or feasibility study proposed, and that will likely lead to expanding the availability of broadband.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This application window is April 28 through May 27. Please submit your application materials by emailing Connect.ME@maine.gov with the subject heading Grant Application.

**Instructions**

Please don’t include attachments or reference attachments; please insert evidence in the order requested. Any information that may be deemed confidential must be submitted as separate files to remain confidential. Please note that applications submitted are made publicly available; please submit confidential information as separate files. Some details of projects funded with grants, including the plans and studies produced, are posted on the ConnectMaine website.

If any elements of the application can’t be completed, then in those locations demonstrate how those elements will be developed as part of the proposed project. The ConnectMaine Authority reserves the right to request additional information necessary to evaluate applications for planning grants. Precertification is an eligibility requirement, and this application contains the elements of precertification in case prior submission and approval haven’t been obtained.

Please contact ConnectMaine staff for any assistance. Please note that the score of an application is only one factor considered by ConnectMaine in awarding grants, among many other factors required or allowed to be reviewed in accordance with the statute and rule, including that planning grants are equitably distributed throughout unserved and underserved areas of the state; additionally, ConnectMaine considers its statutory goals and policies, including that infrastructure be forward-looking to meet future broadband needs.

1. **Applicant Information**

Applicant Signature:

Date Submitted:

1. **Fiscal Agent**

Entity Name:

1. **Grant Requested**

Amount:

1. **Affected Communities**

List each affected municipality, local government or local government authority, or a local nonprofit providing economic development programs, as applicable to the proposed project.

Point of Contact for each Affected Community and any community broadband committees:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Community | Name | Title or Role | Email or Phone |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

1. **Applicant or Agent**

Name:

Title or Role:

Mailing Address:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

1. **Partner, if any, excluding any consultants hired**

Company Name:

Point of Contact Name:

Title:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

1. **Applicant Eligibility**

The applicant may be any general-purpose local government, including a municipality or county; groups or regional partnership of general-purpose local governments, including multiple municipalities, local government authorities, counties, and joint or multi-county development authorities; any broadband utility district or corporation, wholly or partially owned by local government(s); or any nonprofit local or regional community organizations that are providing local or regional economic development programs. State the legal entity of this applicant, or partner if applicable.

Name and type of entity:

If any, list the most recent planning grants awarded by ConnectMaine to any of the entities of this application.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Date of last award | Entity receiving funds |
|  |  |
|  |  |

1. **Executive Summary**

Provide a five-sentence executive summary that identifies the applicant; which phase of activities will be conducted; where in Maine; whether a broadband plan or feasibility will be produced, or what challenge will be overcome by this project; and when completion is anticipated. This serves the purpose of quickly identifying the proposed project among applications and past projects. This summary will also be used when announcing awards of successful applications.

1. **Community Support**

In total the community support scoring category accounts for 20 points. Five of these points are available in the scoring of precertification elements, requested in Section V below.

Describe participation by affected residents in the application process and the amount of economic support to be provided by the community.

1. **Petitions or Letters**

The strong desire of residents and businesses to subscribe to broadband, a community support factor, is demonstrated through lists of those interested in supporting the community’s efforts to expand broadband or in subscribing to broadband service that becomes available. For Phase I projects only, insert any petitions or insert other similar material to serve as evidence of broad community engagement. For Phase II projects only, insert any letters from businesses, or similar material, as evidence of economic support. For projects other than Phase I or II, demonstrate how community support is building.

Broad community engagement and economic-sector support help ensure successful projects and help demonstrate sufficient community support; 10 points, if evidence is submitted, or 0 points.

1. **Surveys or Votes**

For Phase I projects, list any relevant survey question(s) with response rate(s) and the resulting percent of respondents in support of expanding broadband. For Phase II projects, list any warrant article(s) with voter turnout(s) and the voting results(s) in favor of supporting broadband expansion. For other projects, demonstrate how financial support for broadband expansion is building.

Positive willingness-to-pay survey results or positive votes to support proposed projects help ensure successful projects and help demonstrate sufficient community support; 5 points, if there were positive outcomes, or 0 points.

1. **Project Focus**

In total the project focus scoring category accounts for 30 points.

Describe the focus of the proposed project. How will proposed Phase I activities develop a community broadband plan; how will Phase II activities develop a broadband feasibility study; or how will other activities following Phase II address a specific challenge to broadband expansion? How will proposed activities lead to expanding the availability of broadband?

Applicants may apply to fund proposed activities that must be completed within one year:

* Phase I activities;
* a project that combines Phase I and Phase II activities, and any grant funds for Phase II activities will be contingent upon completion of Phase I activities;
* only Phase II activities, if the application demonstrates that Phase I elements have been completed; or
* other activities beyond Phase II to continue the community broadband planning process, if the application demonstrates that Phase I and Phase II elements have been completed.

Elements of Community Broadband Plans produced by Phase I activities:

* a description of local broadband needs and goals;
* an inventory of the existing infrastructure assets;
* a gap analysis defining the additional broadband infrastructure necessary to meet identified needs and goals;
* an assessment of relevant municipal procedures, policies, rules and ordinances that have the effect of delaying or increasing the cost of broadband infrastructure deployment; and
* a strategy to promote digital inclusion that addresses affordable internet service and equipment, digital literacy and public computer access.

Elements of Broadband Feasibility Studies produced by Phase II activities:

* the community’s broadband needs and goals identified in Phase I activities or similar community broadband planning process;
* the inventory and gap analysis of broadband infrastructure conducted during Phase I or similar process;
* the assessment of relevant municipal procedures, policies, rules and ordinances conducted during Phase I or similar process;
* one or more network designs and cost estimates based on input from broadband service providers;
* operating and business models based on input from broadband service providers; and
* information from any other parties that submitted a network design solution during the project.

Following Phase I and Phase II activities, the result of continuing the community broadband planning process may include but isn’t limited to any of the following:

* producing other elements toward a request for proposals to expand broadband,
* building community support toward financial commitments to expand broadband,
* increasing potential subscriptions or take rate, and
* completing elements of applications for other grants.

Applicants are held accountable for funded projects producing compliant plans or studies.[[2]](#footnote-2) Contracts for awarded grants hold applicants accountable for producing required elements or results of their proposed projects. The degree to which the application proposes a project that is likely to lead to broadband expansion is a factor considered in the project focus scoring category, up to 15 points.

1. **Project Area**

Describe the areas covered by the proposed project or included in the proposed activities. Are these areas unserved or underserved?[[3]](#footnote-3) What areas are proposed to be included in eventual broadband expansion?

Areas designated as unserved may be identified in any or all of the following sources:

* The ConnectMaine Broadband Availability Map: <https://maps.sewall.com/connectme/public/>
* The ConnectMaine Unserved Reports: [www.maine.gov/connectme/communities-resources/Broadbandmapping](https://www.maine.gov/connectme/communities-resources/Broadbandmapping)
* Community Broadband Plans posted on the ConnectMaine website: [www.maine.gov/connectme/grants/planning-grants/awards](http://www.maine.gov/connectme/grants/planning-grants/awards)
1. **Project Collaboration**

Describe any collaborations or partnerships for broadband among communities, local or regional nonprofits providing economic development programs, or private-sector stakeholders.

Indicate the number affected communities (including municipalities, local governments or local government authorities, and local nonprofits providing economic development programs) as applicable to this project.

The number of communities collaborating on the proposed project is a factor considered in the project focus scoring category, with greater collaboration scoring higher, up to 15 points.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Number of Communities  | Points |
| >5 | 15 |
| 3-5 | 10 |
| >1 | 5 |

1. **Project Engagement**

Describe how local leaders, residents and businesses of affected communities will be educated and engaged in the proposed project.

1. **Timeline and Milestones**

While planning is an on-going process, for the proposed project for which a planning grant is sought, insert a timeline that lists the milestones and anticipated completion date.

1. **Project Preparation**

In total the project preparation scoring category accounts for 30 points.

Describe the contact made with existing service providers regarding any current or impending plans for expanding broadband infrastructure in the affected community; describe how internet service providers in the region will be engaged in developing the community broadband plan or broadband feasibility study components, or in overcoming the specific challenge to broadband expansion.

Completeness of precertification and the application is a factor considered in the project preparation scoring category. Narratives outline how the project will involve the affected community and internet service providers in the region; 10 points, if those narratives are completed, or 0 points.

To be eligible for planning grants, precertification must be completed and approved. Precertification is a process of engaging stakeholders and gathering information, and which encourages adoption of best practices for community broadband planning. Either complete Section V, or indicate when precertification was previously submitted and skip to Section VI below.

1. **Community Preparation**

A community-driven broadband process relies on broad engagement and support. These activities aim to generate participation in the planning process, build understanding and eventual adoption of broadband, and spur economic support. A community broadband committee is formed with members from varying backgrounds and who bring to bear diverse expertise or roles for the planning process. The community broadband committee must be committed for the duration of community broadband planning; committees that are committed into and through eventual expansion of broadband further ensure community vision and goals are met. List the community broadband committee members, their backgrounds and the roles contributed.

Relevant backgrounds:

* an official representing the affected community, including a local elected official with political will to support broadband;
* an educator who cares about educational opportunities around broadband;
* someone in economic development, including a local business owner, including someone from an industry that’s important to the affected community;
* someone who depends on broadband, including a teleworker, including a student, including a healthcare provider; and
* a key individual to any such project, including someone who’s integral to the fabric of the affected community.

Members with these backgrounds then provide expertise or fill roles:

* a deep dive into broadband, including someone with information technology expertise, including someone with policy expertise;
* a finance expert, including someone with banking expertise, including someone with public-private partnership experience;
* a communicator, both within the committee and from the committee;
* an energizer, who diversifies and brings together the group; and
* a visionary, who drives the process forward and keeps it upbeat.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Background | Role |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

Involving relevant backgrounds and essential roles helps ensure successful projects and helps demonstrate adequate preparation; 5 points toward the community support scoring category, if the list is deemed complete, or 0 points.

The broadband committee is intended to be active in guiding the planning and the efforts that address broadband availability and adoption. This can begin with convening residents, businesses and providers to inform and involve these stakeholders. List attendees to at least one community meeting that engaged the existing internet service providers.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name of Attendee | Title or Role | Community or Affiliation |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

The broadband committee creates a vision statement that describes the role of broadband in the community’s future. It is created with input from the affected communities and from meetings with internet service providers and other stakeholders. The vision articulates specific priority areas or purposes of broadband in the affected community. Include the community vision as it currently exists or describe how it will be created.

Communication plans help ensure consistent, transparent and inclusive communication that reaches all stakeholders. Describe the communication plan as it current exists or how it will be developed by the broadband committee.

Making a plan for outreach and communication helps ensure successful projects and helps demonstrate adequate preparation; 5 points, if a plan is developed, or 0 points.

1. **Gaps Identification**

Conversations among communities, providers and experts will help determine the location of gaps in broadband availability in the affected communities. List the local or relevant elected officials of the affected communities, who are being engaged in broadband conversations.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name of Official | Title or Position | Community or Affiliation |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

List the institutions (such as but not limited to libraries, healthcare centers, schools, business districts and large employers, and governmental facilities) that support expansion of broadband in the affected communities.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name of Facility | Type of Facility | Community or Patrons |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

List local and regional nonprofits providing economic development programs, the electricity providers and private-sector stakeholders, who are being engaged for potential collaboration in broadband efforts.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name of Contact | Title or Affiliation | Community or Affiliation |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

Describe the areas of the affected communities where broadband service is and isn’t available; include the estimated number of premises that have access to broadband service and the estimated number of premises that could be served by expanded broadband infrastructure.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Understanding the extent of broadband service helps ensure successful projects and helps demonstrate adequate preparation; 5 points, if a lack of broadband service is identified, or 0 points.

1. **Planning Preparation**

Preparing for broadband planning and expansion involves identifying entities that may be working to address gaps in broadband availability. List the internet service providers who are currently serving customers in the affect communities, and any internet service providers who might be interested in knowing about broadband efforts.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name of Contact | Title or Affiliation | Community or Affiliation |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

Meetings among communities and providers can compare service maps with customer experiences, identify future projects to improve service and better understand the broadband needs of customers. List the occurrence of these meetings, which providers attended and any results.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Date of Meetings | Providers Attending | Actions or Conclusions |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

1. **Financial Preparation**

Financial support may come from any number of public and private sources. Building up to that support involves understanding how the internet is currently being used or valued. List the municipal services that residents and businesses can access online; describe how the municipality depends on the internet for its activities; list any municipal services or activities that would benefit from expanded broadband service.

If the municipality has a franchise agreement with a cable provider, describe any expectations for expanding infrastructure and the expiration date.

Describe any tax increment financing or economic development grant for the affected communities in part or in whole.

Describe how this broadband planning process will align with other visioning or planning activities of the affected communities. List any local or regional economic development plans, comprehensive or capital plans, or other similar plans that may or could identify broadband as valuable to the affected communities.

Describe evidence of project benefits to students, remote workers, telehealth patients and support facilities, and small businesses.

Ensuring successful expansion includes addressing the adoption or use of internet service available through digital inclusion efforts and projects focused on closing the digital divide. Digital inclusion may include affordable broadband service including internet subscription subsidies, affordable equipment, digital literacy or computer-skills training including digital education programs for students or adults, and public computer access. List any digital inclusion efforts, other information technology activities, or other adoption and affordability efforts. List community commitments and strategies to increase the subscription rate and maximize the use of the proposed broadband infrastructure, or describe how these strategies will be developed.

Digital inclusion strategies and efforts help ensure benefits from broadband availability are realized with expansion of infrastructure; 10 points, if efforts are underway, or 0 points.

1. **Financial Commitment**

In total the financial commitment scoring category accounts for 20 points.

Describe whether or not the proposed project would occur without this grant being awarded.

1. **Budget**

List all costs of the proposed project and the secured, financial commitments from the applicant and other sources. Itemized costs may be estimated at time of application; applicants who are awarded and receive funds are required to itemize all actual expenses. Include expenses associated with activities proposed to produce the plan or study, or proposed to overcome a specific challenge. Either list the costs covered by the proposed project or list $0 for costs to be covered by in-kind contributions. Committed dollars cannot consist of in-kind contributions. Committed dollars include all secured matching funds and may include other grant funds awarded for the same project.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Anticipated Expenses  | Total ($) | Committed ($) | Grant ($) |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Totals** |  |  |  |

While many factors affect costs, ConnectMaine may use these guidelines and others to award the very limited grant funds available:

* Activities that the applicant, broadband committees or affected communities have the capability of conducting should be covered by in-kind contributions or committed dollars;
* Most Phase I activities could and should be conducted by broadband committees and community members;
* Only activities that the applicant, broadband committees or affected communities aren’t capable of conducting on their own should result in consultant expenses;
* Grant dollars should be reserved to cover expenses associated with other activities that aren’t typical for the applicant, broadband committees or affected communities to conduct on their own, or that can’t be covered by in-kind contributions;
* Grant dollars for Phase I projects shouldn’t exceed $5,000 for the first community, with added costs but also economies of scale for each additional affected community;
* Phase II projects will likely cost more, and will likely involve consultant expenses, given the engineering designs and business modeling required; however, in-kind contributions for fieldwork, mapping and conducting RFP processes should be explored; and
* Grant dollars for projects following Phase I and Phase II shouldn’t exceed $10,000, because activities target a specific challenge to expanding broadband and the applicant has demonstrated a defined need.
1. **Grant**

Calculate the percentage of total cost covered by the financial commitment, including secured municipally-authorized funds, private funds raised and the financial commitments from any other sources; and the percentage of total cost covered by grant amount requested.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Committed/Cost | Grant/Cost |
|  |  |

The amount of financial support provided by members of the affected community is a factor in the financial commitment scoring category, with lower proportions of grant funds scoring higher, up to 20 points.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Grant/Cost | Points |
| <50% | 20 |
| 50-74% | 11-19 |
| 75-99% | 1-10 |
| 100% | 0 |

1. Evaluation of applications is conducted in accordance with the ConnectMaine rule: <https://www.maine.gov/connectme/about/statutes-rulemaking> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ConnectMaine statute, 35-A M.R.S.A. Ch. 93, §9217, lists the elements required. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. At least annually, and subject to 30-day comment period, ConnectMaine designates geographic areas that are unserved. Currently areas are designated as unserved where internet service is less than 25mbps/3mbps, and areas are designated as underserved where less than 20% of the households have access to internet service of at least 25mbps/3mbps. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Currently, ConnectMaine promotes use of the Maine Speed Test, accessible here: <https://www.mainebroadbandcoalition.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)