

Applicant Guidance

16 March 2022

Broadband Infrastructure Grants Program

Authority Members

Nick Battista, Chair
Jasmine Bishop
Fred Brittain
Susan Corbett
Heather Johnson
Jeff Letourneau
Liz Wyman

Background

The ConnectMaine Authority posted answers to questions and relevant comments, beyond the content of the application guidance and other materials for applicants to the Broadband Infrastructure Grants Program. This document retains the questions relevant to submitting applications before the current deadline and includes new answers to questions about the application process. All answers to prior questions asked are also still posted on the ConnectMaine website for reference by applicants.

Based on extensive stakeholder engagement since fall 2020, ConnectMaine set the following objectives for the infrastructure grants program:

- **Leverage Investments:** Maximize investment in broadband infrastructure and maximize opportunities to leverage resources and funding from other sources to support deployment of broadband infrastructure; aim to correct market failures due to low premise density
- **Seek Regional Equity:** Balance awards in consideration of investment incentives and regional equity; create a geographically equitable distribution of projects around the State
- **Recognize Community Visions:** Align with community visions and goals for economic development, education, civic engagement and healthcare
- **Favor Future-Proof Networks:** Fund forward-looking, scalable infrastructure that provides ubiquitous, universally available broadband service, with sufficient capacity for future growth for the greatest number of years, giving preference to projects providing symmetrical service
- **Advance Digital Equity and Inclusion:** Consider projects that propose the lowest price for the highest quality of service of the lowest service level offering; no grant will be awarded for proposed projects that allow data caps on service provided; all projects funded must result in providing standardized tiers of service, including one for income-eligible individuals

Based on continued engagement, learning from the last application process and rulemaking since, ConnectMaine incorporated recommendations for the next application window for infrastructure grants:

- A single track for all applications, including community and provider applicants, including community-driven and provider expansion projects
- New designation of broadband service, and performance criteria for awarded projects
- New designations of unserved and underserved areas, and eligibility criteria for project areas
- New application evaluation process that uses preference criteria and a weighting system
- For preparing and submitting applications, systems and tools include an online Grants Portal, a web-based FiberMap, an Application Data Form, and other separate files

CONNECTMAINE

Questions

Q: What if the existing ISPs didn't confirm whether or not installation of broadband infrastructure and service of at least 100mpbs download and 100mpbs upload, equivalent to the proposed project, would occur within the same period as the proposed project, within 14 days of provider outreach?

A: Any response from providers doesn't affect an applicant's ability to submit a completed application at any time during the application window. Providers that aren't planning installation of broadband infrastructure and don't already provide broadband service shouldn't be obligated to take the time to confirm lack of broadband availability. Required provider outreach offers another opportunity to submit broadband data showing that service is or will be provided, but providers may choose whether or not to respond. The initial outreach by the applicant is a pre-application requirement that must be completed to submit the application.

Q: Can an applicant change the boundary of an eligible project area selected, to exclude or include certain potential subscriber locations, or use their own numbers or data instead? What if the data on potential subscriber locations in FiberMap are incorrect?

A: While the Eligible Project Areas data layer must be used, and the boundaries can't be edited, the applicant has the opportunity to exclude certain potential subscriber locations or include additional potential subscriber locations, as described in Section III.B.3. Rather than changing the boundary or polygon, there are some cases where potential subscriber locations can be excluded or included for proposed projects, by selection of those points, and other ways that the applicant can augment data submitted, as described in the rest of Section III.B and in Section IV.A of the Application Guide. While no other data used will be accepted and Data Forms using numbers from other data won't be accepted, in the Narrative the applicant may describe the project area and other data used in the network design, especially if any points classified as unserved were excluded from the project. While no datasets are perfectly accurate, the Eligible Project Areas data layer allows applications to be compared consistently. State funds are awarded to help achieve universal broadband service, and to help achieve one of the program objectives of recognizing community visions, applicants are encouraged to proposed projects that serve whole communities.

Q: Which entity should be listed as being financially responsible for ongoing operations in the Data Form? Whose subscriber base is considered in demonstrating financial capacity and sustainability of the project?

A: Section II Eligibility Criteria apply to the applicant and any other entities involved in the project, such as the ISP involved in the project, whether the ISP is the applicant or not. To help maximize investment in broadband infrastructure, the eligibility criteria include financial capacity and sustainability. The Application Data Form captures information about the size of the proposed project relative to the existing subscribed locations of the ISP involved in the proposed project, signaling whether or not the applicant must enter additional information to demonstrate financial sustainability of the project. The ISP involved in the project or other entity that will provide service and have incoming revenue from subscriptions, should be entered into that field of the Data Form.

Q: How will ConnectMaine determine Grant Necessity?

A: To achieve one of the program objectives, "maximize investment in broadband infrastructure," this requirement from ConnectMaine statute and rule is demonstrated by the applicant with information submitted, including but not limited to Sections II, III.C, III.D.1. and IV.A.

Q: Are the details in the Data Form really required?

A: Yes, if this information isn't entered into the Data Form, then additional information will be requested before the application can be evaluated for any award. All infrastructure grants awarded by ConnectMaine in the last five years to all entities involved in the project must be listed. All proposed services should be listed, but especially at least one that is at least 100mpbs upload and nonpromotional for at least residential subscribers, and the symmetrical gig service level if offered. All items should be listed for expenses, the type of unit, cost per unit and number of units in the capital budget cost. Source details about financial commitments must be entered. Refer to the instructions in the Data Form as needed.

CONNECTMAINE

Q: What does an applicant do if they get stuck in the Grants Portal?

A: This is a new process, so there will be questions that come from the unfamiliarity of it all. ConnectMaine staff emailed potential applicants in late January a list of instructions for how to change the grant amount requested and otherwise edit the application in the Grants Portal before hitting the submit button. All information entered into the Grants Portal must be consistent with the information pulled from FiberMap and entered into the Data Form as applicable. Please email ConnectMaine staff for any assistance needed, which will be offered through 3pm on Friday: Connect.ME@maine.gov

Q: Besides the required documents, what are the supplemental files required to be uploaded? Can the applicant upload additional supporting documentation to be considered as part of the application?

A: The required documents and supplemental files that must be uploaded to the Grants Portal are described in the Application Guidance Section III. The application process includes access to FiberMap to help applicants to generate or import the high-level network design therein. In addition to the Application Data Form and Application Narrative, the supplemental files required include at least a Network Diagram, which is different than the network design imported to FiberMap, refer to Section III.E.1., and a Project Timeline, refer to E.3. Any uploaded documents that aren't requested will be ignored, e.g., support letters, marketing.

Q: How and when does an applicant transfer their proposed project data from FiberMap to ConnectMaine?

A: Once the applicant is ready to have data transferred, and also ready to hit submit in the Grants Portal, reach out to VETRO using the email given in the Grants Portal and FiberMap Guide. Include a description of which data layer(s) should be transferred. These data transfers will be ongoing even after the submission deadline, as long as the application was submitted in the Grants Portal by the deadline.

Q: Is the application information self-reported or third-party verified?

A: Part of the Broadband Infrastructure Grants Program includes Grants Verification and Validation, for which ConnectMaine has contracted consultant services to support verification needs during the application evaluation process.

Q: When will the applicant know that the application is being considered? When will awards be announced?

A: After submitting the application, the applicant will receive an automated email stating when the application has been moved to "in review" by ConnectMaine. If additional information is needed to evaluate the application, then another automated email will be sent with further instructions. ConnectMaine or its contractors may reach out directly for additional information required. ConnectMaine anticipates considering recommendations for awarding grants at its April meeting tentatively scheduled for the 27th. All applicants will receive direct communications about their projects through the application evaluation process.

Q: How are awarded grants disbursed?

A: The Application Guide outlines the compliance requirements for grant recipients. The commencement report is used to request up to 25% of the grant awarded upfront. Additional disbursements are justified using progress reports by showing expenditure of funds already received and funds being requested. The final 25% of the grant awarded is withheld until the completion report and supporting documentation are approved. These details are also captured in the contract that the grant recipient will sign to accept the award.