

CONNECTMAINE Authority

Broadband Infrastructure Grants Program, 15 December 2021

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Introductions

Agenda

- Review the Refinements to the Infrastructure Grants Program
- Introduce the Broadband Intelligence Platform
- Overview of the Application Guidance
- Share Important Dates

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The refinements of the grants program were presented back in September, but we'll review them again.

Then we'll give a high-level presentation of the new broadband intelligence platform. Finally there will be an overview of the application Guidance. A more in-depth workshop for potential applicants will occur after the application window is opened in the new year.

Objectives

- **Leverage Investments:** Maximize investment in broadband infrastructure; aim to correct market failures due to low premise density
- **Seek Regional Equity:** Balance investment incentives and regional equity
- **Recognize Community Visions:** Align with community visions and goals
- **Favor Future-Proof Networks:** Fund forward-looking, scalable infrastructure that provides ubiquitous, universally available broadband
- **Advance Digital Equity and Inclusion:** Consider price; no grant for data caps; all projects funded must include one for income-eligible individuals

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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

Recommendations

What we heard

- Preference for least served areas
- Preference for greatest quality
- Prioritize universal broadband
- Address density issues
- Balance financial commitments
- Consider affordability

What we're doing

- Prioritizing based on preferences
- Serve all unserved
- Balance cost-benefit
- Consider lowest density areas
- Adjust financial commitments
- Address price and affordability program

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Prior engagement led to recommendations that included focusing on universal broadband, of greatest quality, in least served areas, with community contributions, while addressing density of potential subscriber locations and considering price for service

ConnectMaine will give preference to projects in unserved and underserved areas that provide the greatest relative improvement to existing internet service.

The grants program was refined to require that all potential subscriber locations in unserved areas be served by the project; cost-benefit remains the basis of evaluation but doesn't supersede other criteria; density of potential subscriber locations in the project area below 18/mile will be considered; a minimum financial commitment per location will be required instead of percentage of project cost, additional commitments will be rewarded, with community commitments based on valuations; finally, both price of service and participation in an affordability program will be considered.

Changes

2021 Process

- Two-track application
- Applicant-designed project areas
- Scoring that favored cost-benefit without consideration of density
- Confusing application materials
- Document sharing and storage
- Grants Verification & Validation was new

2022 Process

- One-track with preference groups
- Eligible project areas proposed
- Weights instead of points with cost-benefit as the base
- Application Guidance document
- Online Grants Portal
- Integration of BIP

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The refinements allowed ConnectMaine to achieve goals of encouraging universal service and supporting smaller projects with a new evaluation process instead of two tracks.

To prevent any unserved staying unserved, project areas are proposed in which all unserved must be served.

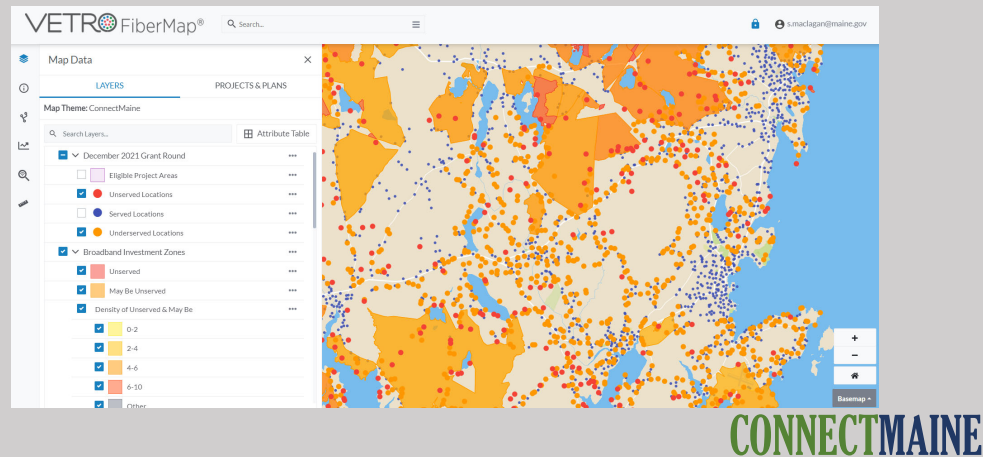
Instead of straight up scoring, which overwhelmingly favored cost-benefit above all else, the evaluation process will include weighting the initial cost-benefit with other criteria.

Instead of the evaluation criteria being sprinkled through the application, the application guidance combines the evaluation process in one section.

Instead of obtaining and submitting the application by email, a grants portal will lead potential applicants through the process where they'll upload files in one place.

Despite best efforts, the verification & validation process, including audit requirements, surprised a few applicants or partners; now all this information will be integrated into the Broadband Intelligence Platform and accessible upfront.

Broadband Intelligence Platform Grants Portal, FiberMap, Grants V&V, etc.



The biggest change to the grants program is the development of a broadband intelligence platform. Data management is more than stagnant maps. The Broadband Intelligence Platform integrates mapping activities, grantmaking and reporting. BIP includes the online grants portal for potential applicants, use of FiberMap for identifying project areas and understanding broadband availability across Maine, reporting and accountability measures under the grants verification and validation process, and other future opportunities.

Data Inputs and Management

Datasets depicted as layers of information, to give fuller picture of reality

- Industry data provided to Sewall Company
- Speed tests from Maine Speed Testing Initiative
- National layers from NTIA, Census and FCC
- Maine geographic (and future demographic) data

Methodology to propose Eligible Project Areas

- Without existing networks mapped, used census blocks & municipalities
- CostQuest data of potential subscriber locations; max. speeds likelihood
- Compared to Sewall layer, NTIA Indicators of Need and FCC layers
- Compared to ConnectMaine awarded grants layer, speed testing layers

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The speed testing initiative started in fall 2020 is contributing data in the development this new Broadband Intelligence Platform. Along with datasets from internet service providers, national broadband organizations, census and FCC, in addition to purchased data from CostQuest about the likelihood of potential subscriber locations being connected to various technologies, ConnectMaine is using this better data to map eligible project areas for the infrastructure grants application process.

Broadband Availability Map

- What service MIGHT be available
 - Not actual services to individuals
- Data reported by the industry
 - Protected by confidentiality
- Aggregated into ranges of speeds
- Depicted as lines along roads
- Snapshot in time
 - Includes service that COULD be
 - Broadband expansion isn't live
- Access from ConnectMaine website:
www.maine.gov/connectme/communities-resources/Broadbandmapping
- Layer of speeds available
- Layer of grants awarded

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There isn't yet a public view of BIP, so it doesn't replace the Broadband Availability Map. The Broadband Availability Map is intended to provide a starting point for customers to identify what broadband service might be available in their communities. The mapping data were reported by the industry, reflecting the FCC reporting through September 2019 and any reports during the most recent ConnectMaine request of the industry through this past September. While this map is the best information on broadband availability in Maine, ConnectMaine knows the information doesn't represent the actual services that are available to individual customers. This may be the last update of this particular map, since the current contract expires at the end of this year. ConnectMaine anticipates using BIP in creating a new Availability Map sometime in the new year, depending on resources. The data reported is most often polygon-data or areas served by ISPs. This is aggregated to comply with confidentiality rules, into ranges of speeds in the service provided, then depicted as lines along roads, which can leave out one side of the road or another or remote offshoots; finally, this map is how the designations of unserved and underserved areas are depicted. This map is known to first overstate availability by including reported service that could be provided even if it currently isn't possible to connect additional customers, and then understate availability overtime as expansion projects occur. In the future, a public view of the Broadband Intelligence Platform would be a more refined way to depict data had on broadband availability across the state.

Application Guidance

- Eligibility Criteria
 - Pre-application requirements
 - Eligible project areas & performance
- Application Process
 - Grants Portal & FiberMap
 - Data Form, Narrative & Files
- Application Evaluation
 - Additional information requests
 - Preference criteria & weighting system
- Compliance Measures
 - Important actions & dates
 - Reporting, validation & tracking
- Available on ConnectMaine website: www.maine.gov/connectme/grants/infrastructure-grants/application
- Included in the Grants Portal

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The Application Guidance document identifies required information that must be included for a complete application. It should help walk potential applicants through the process of determining eligibility, applying for grants and understanding compliance with the grants program. ConnectMaine is interested in hearing about any areas of confusion in the document, questions left unanswered, or any potential concerns with meeting the objectives of the grants program. For this purpose, we'll present an overview of some of the content...

Eligible Project Areas

Required Provider Outreach

- Project Areas selected
- Share or adequately describe areas
- Responses with broadband data

Opportunity to Review Areas

- Availability Map is updated
- Specific areas identified
- Availability data submitted

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Similar to this past year, applicants are required to conduct provider outreach, but the ConnectMaine rule was updated: ISPs are sought to confirm whether or not installation of broadband infrastructure and service of at least 100mpbs download and 100mbps upload, equivalent to the proposed project, would occur within the same period as the proposed project. Applicants will register for the Grants Portal, from which they will obtain access to FiberMap in order to select their proposed project areas. These can be shared or otherwise adequately described in provider outreach that specific with regard to the areas of the proposed project.

Responses from ISPs that service is or will be provided must be accompanied by broadband data showing address-level information that depicts points showing the extent of service availability, preferably in shapefile format. ConnectMaine will work with providers, applicants and other credible sources on a case-by-case basis to consider the format and content of the data that can be submitted.

This follows the same process ConnectMaine is using for the Opportunity Review Areas, following the recent update to the Broadband Availability Map. Broadband data submitted contribute to the Eligible Project Areas that will be proposed. There are 30 days to submit broadband data for specific areas identified for review, through January 9, and ConnectMaine plans to confirm designations on 1.12.

Financial Commitments

- Minimum per potential subscriber location in the project area
- Unweighted cost-benefit based on unserved & underserved
- Community financial commitment based on valuation
- ISP financial commitment based on potential subscriber locations

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To better balance cost-benefit with other evaluation criteria including consideration of density, the financial commitments toward the project cost are considered differently than in the past:

A minimum financial commitment per potential subscriber location in the selected project area is an eligibility requirement, and currently being proposed at \$700/location.

The unweighted cost-benefit is calculated as the grant amount requested divided by the number of potential subscriber locations in unserved areas and any in underserved areas that will be served by the project. This unweighted cost-benefit will be weighted by factors of project scope and project value.

One factor of project scope is the financial commitment from the community, with larger community financial commitments receiving greater weight. The weight received will depend on the size of the municipal valuation, as reported by the Maine Revenue Service. The premise being that municipalities that can afford to commit greater amounts will have to do so in order to realize the full weight of this factor. The weight from the ISP financial commitment will depend on the size of the commitment relative to the project scope.

Application Process

Grants Portal

- Inactive until window opens
- Link from ConnectMaine website
- Videos to help
- Registration first
- Then “apply online” for the “funding request” from “ConnectMaine”

FiberMap

- Contact info from Grants Portal
- Used to select project areas
- VETRO will provide add'l guide
- More detail at future workshop

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The applicant will enter information and upload files to the online Grants Portal. While you can view the videos linked on the ConnectMaine website now, the grants portal is inactive with regard to ConnectMaine, until the application window opens. At that point, you'll be able to register before then starting an application. Applicants that already use FiberMap will contact VETRO to obtain access to data layers needed for this application process. Other applicants will contact VETRO to obtain access to FiberMap. In the Grants Portal, the applicant will be given instructions on how to contact VETRO. More detail on getting and using FiberMap will be part of the workshop for potential applicants that'll be held after the application window opens.

Application Process

Data Form

- Downloaded from Grants Portal
- Filled out and uploaded as Excel
- Consistent with the Grants Portal
- Calculates preliminary weights

Narrative & Files

- Downloaded from Grants Portal
- Uploaded as Word or PDF
- Supplemental files uploaded
- Everything uploaded before hitting “submit”

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The application data form captures more information than what's entered directly into the Grants Portal, providing more details and making the application evaluation process possible. The information entered into the Grants Portal must be consistent with that entered into the Data Form. Preliminary weights and the weighted cost-benefit of the proposed project will be calculated in Application Data Form.

The application narrative can also be downloaded from the Grants Portal. This will be filled out and then uploaded as either the Word file or PDF format. Other supplemental files will also be uploaded as directed in the application guidance. Some information is needed in multiple places, or it's generated in one place but needed in another. The application guidance walks through this process, to help ensure consistency. In this way, ConnectMaine can efficiently review preliminary weights and identify if any additional information needs to be requested before application evaluation.

Application Evaluation

- Unweighted cost-benefit based on unserved & underserved
- Weighted cost-benefit from factors of project scope & project value
 - Density, financial commitments
 - Subscription price, affordability offering
- Examples provided in the Application Guidance
- More detail in future workshop

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Within each preference group, this unweighted cost-benefit is weighted by factors of project scope and project value, to compare applications for awards. Receiving greater weights will improve the competitiveness of the application.

The weight of project scope is based on relevant factors that may increase the cost or difficulty in expanding broadband service: density of potential subscriber locations in the project area, financial commitments from the community and from the ISP.

The weight of project value is based on relevant factors that may increase the value of the proposed project: the subscription price for service and the affordability offering.

More detail about how this weighting system will work is part of the workshop for potential applicants that'll be held after the application window opens.

Compliance Measures

- Important actions and date for grant recipients
- Describes the reports for requesting disbursement of funds
- Describes the completion report requirements, including audit
- Describes the tracking report

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These details of the compliance measures will be discussed in more detail at the future workshop for potential applicants. ConnectMaine is currently interested in hearing if there is any confusion with what the application guidance lists, even though the details may not be fully understood by all potential applicants yet.

Important Dates

- 1.12 ConnectMaine monthly meeting to open application window
- 1.19 workshop for potential applicants, in-depth on FiberMap and application process
- 2.11 deadline for required provider outreach, ISP responses in 14 days
- 3.20 deadline to submit completed applications
- April ConnectMaine monthly meeting to award grants

www.maine.gov/connectme/grants

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Upcoming dates to keep an eye on include when the application window is opened, which affects the timing of everything else

In order to show proposed projects to ISPs, most likely need to get into grants portal and select project areas in FiberMap before deadline for required provider outreach
ConnectMaine will keep the website up to date

Questions?

ConnectMaine Staff

Connect.ME@maine.gov, 207.624.9849

www.maine.gov/connectme/

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Community Engagement Strategy

VETRO Cares

Community Broadband Planning Support Program, ConnectMaine

- 3 cohorts so far
- Data from Southwestern Waldo
- Availability, cost-modeling
- Future network management

GEO Partners

Community of Practice, MBC

- Analytical pilot, Maine West
- Scaling tools statewide
- Speed testing will continue
- Cost-modeling & grants analytics
- Future, additional data sharing

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BIP is also connected to the community engagement strategy, where we continue to sustain the community of broadband advocates that support local broadband investment and engagement. There are ten municipalities or regions involved in the third cohort of VETRO Cares, local leaders using FiberMap toward broadband planning. These communities, and any other FiberMap users, can work with VETRO and ConnectMaine to have the Eligible Project Areas layer imported to their FiberMap instance. The communities that generate their own data and layers, can easily submit them to ConnectMaine in the same way, like Southwestern Waldo County. More data from finer scales, crowdsourcing is great! GEO Partners is another opportunity for communities to visualize their crowdsourced data, including speed testing. ConnectMaine continues to import speed testing data to its FiberMap. With the Maine Broadband Coalition, GEO Partners is also scaling its cost-modeling and grants analytical tools for communities, as part of the community broadband planning support program in the Community of Practice. There will be future opportunities to further integrate data sharing across platforms.

What's next for BIP?

- Importing more census and demographic information to refine identification of eligible project areas, areas of most need, digital equity
- Buying infrastructure data to evaluate the business case for infrastructure projects, middle-mile and last-mile cost-modeling
- Analyzing project areas to ensure integration of middle-mile and last-mile projects, Capital Projects Fund required Project Plan
- Adding staff capacity to translate goals into mapping activities, as demand continues to grow and be enriched with more mapping data and uses
- Mapping to show broadband expansion statewide, progress on goals

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The new Broadband Intelligence Platform can be described as mapping on steroids. Census and demographic information, over 250 data layers from the National Broadband Availability Map, can be viewed. Data can be analyzed to identify areas of need, propose grant-eligible areas and evaluate selected project areas. The Broadband Intelligence Platform can also be used to demonstrate progress on state broadband goals.

The federal Capital Projects Fund allows for middle-mile projects that support last-mile projects. If the Maine Connectivity Authority plans to invest in the middle-mile projects based on its statutory authority, then the CPF Project Plan will need to integrate with last-mile projects. The Broadband Intelligence Platform would be critical for this effort.

The staffing strategy avoids unnecessary disruptions and duplicative overhead with MCA. One of the very likely five to six headcount among the two state broadband entities should be a GIS specialist who can translate big ideas into data management tasks, and can support both grants and community programming, and can support advocacy activities.