

March Meeting Notes

24 March 2021

Temporary Recording: https://networkmaine.zoom.us/rec/share/KXGsDgUhwIWTdpR6levZixph-iZKItzuWnRvxcLgaobu1YcQAP9hpBY_IzmWb8rV.aFJTfNVYXWx-uQrA

Authority Members

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

Introductions of Members and Staff

Nick Battista, Jeff Letourneau, Liz Wyman, Susan Corbett, Fred Brittain, Jasmine Bishop, Denise Garland, alternate for Heather Johnson, Peggy Schaffer, Stephenie MacLagan

Meeting Kickoff

Portland Press virtual panel—Susan

- Recording should be posted on PPH website
- Over 300 attendees

ConnectMaine of years passed—Nick

- Digital archives of ConnectMaine's first meeting in 2006

Senator King's reaction to the American Rescue Plan—Nick

“A historic monumental step in the right direction, but the funds aren't enough to get the job done; we need to continue to build on public and private investments and broadband infrastructure.”

Notes of Last Meeting

Approval of the February minutes: Fred motioned, Susan 2nd, 7:0

Review of Operations

Executive Director's Report—Peggy

- Infrastructure grants

March 10th was a grants workshop, which is now available on the ConnectMaine website and Maine Broadband Coalition website.

- Federal programs

Nick and Peggy participated in a webinar on the federal funds applied to broadband. There's still a lot of uncertainty about how the funds will flow from Treasury. There's been advocacy work to ensure the intent of the legislation passed. The opportunities are great for stacking multiple sources of funds over the next four months. Most providers are going to participate in the FCC's affordability program funded by the Emergency Broadband Benefit.

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Board Questions

- Liz: What does stacking monies mean?

Peggy: capital stacking means bringing in multiple streams of money to maximize or leverage all sources of funds to build broadband to people.

- Liz: Can ConnectMaine give grants for subscription subsidies?

Peggy: We don't have the funds to do that ourselves. We have authority to work on digital inclusion, under which we could address affordability.

- Liz: Are funds intended to address digital inclusion and affordability.

Peggy: The intent was for infrastructure, but we have the view point that without addressing digital inclusion, having infrastructure isn't enough. Nick: There's a leadership opportunity to message these connections among communities and state agencies. Fred: There are affordability programs through the Department of Human Services. Susan: The National Digital Equity Center is working to update its website to navigate eligibility requirements of affordability programs; having a centralized location for all this information will be helpful, echoed by Jasmine. Peggy: We also funded the Community Development Block Grant Program to provide actual laptops to people who are eligible for the the program they're running with the National Digital Equity Center, and who need more than just a tablet. Susan: Folks can learn more about all these programs on the NDEC website. Nick: The 3 statutory goals speak to needs and uses of broadband more so than about infrastructure.

Operations

ConnectMaine structure—Nick

- Dividing work into committees

This way board members can dig more substantively, receive updates and have the right level of conversations as a board.

- Evolving governance and structure

Seems to be working but observing and listening for feedback on structural needs. Be thinking about how many committees we have and the right number of them as many board members are on many committees.

Action: Staff will make a list of committees and board membership.

Update on Governance—Peggy & Committee (Jasmine, Liz & Nick)

- Acquisition of consulting services

After directing staff to find professional assistance, staff investigated at least two consultants, and decided to contract with Starboard Leadership.

- Commitment of committee members

There were several volunteers for this work, and we want to confirm commitment of a committee of three board members. Jasmine, Liz & Nick are committed, and other board members interested in being more engaged should reach out to Nick or staff soon.

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- Timeline of activities

Anticipating a first meeting with committee end of next week. Starting with the committee and expanding conversations with other board members to ensure understanding of board members' visions and governance needs. Revisiting the Board's workplan, making sure we're doing what we need to on the governance front. Anticipating draft by-laws or other documents to help with governance by end of June.

Board Questions

- Liz: Is Jeffrey from Starboard going to talk to other board members?

Peggy: Yes, the plan is to start with the governance committee and then expand to all board members, to help ensure the right direction is taken. Nick: This is an opportunity to figure out how we have these conversations as a board; now is the time to say you want to be substantively involved.

Action: Staff will email doodle to get this meeting scheduled end of next week.

Decision on Grants Verification & Validation—Peggy

- Debrief background and RFP Responses

Tilson Technology voluntarily provided technical reviews during the Connect Kids Now! grants, then presentation from Tilson to the board late last year; Tilson responded to RFI this past winter; Tilson was sole response to recent RFP

- Recommendation

RFP response seemed to address the aspects staff expected, recommend contracting.

Board Questions

- Liz: Is the \$175/hr the rate regardless of the number of hours, or is the amount of time they expect going to determine the cost?

Peggy: Yes, the rate is the proposal, and the number of hours may be different, so the total cost may be different. Liz: Right, I think that 20 applications would be light. The hourly rate is very reasonable and their plan of work is very responsive. Peggy: We can ensure there's a cap to the cost of the project in the contract, echoed by Liz & Jeff. Jeff: should also include periodic reports on hours work, milestones built into the contract.

- Fred: Verification seems to be on the mark, but is the cost estimate reasonable or accurate with regard to Validation activities?

Peggy: Proposal would be to sample projects for field validation. The contract will clarify the process of developing the validation process. Liz: The response reflects the vagueness of the RFP, but proposal would be to develop the validation activities we need, and they have experience to give guidance on what will work for us. Nick: This is a collective opportunity to learn, and for rapid improvements to our work. Peggy: It's more likely we'll have 40-50 applications for verification. Liz: There would be some economies of scale, so maybe \$300,000 as a cap in the initial contract. Fred: We can always amend the contract if needed.

Approval of accepting the Tilson proposal and direct staff to negotiate the initial contract at the blended hourly rate of \$175 per hour with a cap of \$300,000 and appropriate milestones built into the contract to assess progress: Liz motioned, Jeff 2nd, 7:0

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Updates on Data Intelligence Platform—Peggy & Committee (Jeff, Fred & Nick)

- Status of RFP

RFP was reviewed by OIT to include accessibility language. It's posted on our website. There's a virtual meeting for potential bidders' questions on Monday. Proposals are due mid-April. If we have one response, we'll bring that to the board; otherwise, this committee will review proposals and make a recommendation. With big federal funds coming in, this feels very helpful to move in a positive direction for our work.

Board Questions: none

Update on MOU for NECEC Broadband Fund—Nick & Peggy

- Memorandum of understanding signed for first half of 2021

The MOU is very similar to conversations in the winter; the only change is that this MOU is for only the first two quarters of this year, to get the money following and work happening. The MOU also went through our legal counsel. Initial funds should land end of this week, and another disbursement will occur next month.

- Status of planning the use of the Broadband Fund

Does putting this into a committee make sense to manage it and provide the right level of oversight? Should it be a subcommittee of the Plan Committee, since some of this would evolve during the strategic planning process? In addition to the funds available, there's also considerations or opportunities from the infrastructure itself.

Board Questions

- Jeff: NECEC should be addressed in the next triennial plan, echoed by Peggy, and some board oversight or involvement would be good.

Nick: so consolidate this with the plan committee? Jeff: Yes, given the amount of work and activities coming down the pike. Heather: NECEC comes with stipulations and doesn't need or can't be over-programmed, echoed by Nick & Peggy. Jasmine: Having the governance committee define committees and work so we know where to put these types of things, a goal of the governance committee. Nick: It might be worth considering a group to look across all the sources funds, making recommendations on making the most of opportunities. Without a fully formed structure yet, this could be a group or couple of board members for now, potentially changing it based on governance work later. Peggy: It would be really helpful to have standing committees; there's only seven board members. This broadband fund is prescriptive at this point, so it seems like this conversation should be folded into strategic planning.

- Fred: Need to establish the plan for the Broadband Fund based on timing of funds and level of certainty.

Action: The Plan Committee will own NECEC work at least in short-term.

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Discussion on Triennial Plan

Updates on Strategic Planning—Nick, Staff & Committee (Fred, Susan & Jeff)

- Background

There's a memo on this; we have to do strategic planning every three years. Plan Committee considered how they'd like to do strategic planning as a board, opportunity for its own visioning and opportunity externally for engaging the public in ConnectMaine activities.

- Preparing for strategic planning over next couple of months to kickoff this summer

The starting point will be what are the vision and goals, taking those out to the public for input. This would be building on what we learned over the fall, having conversations on adjusting our programs and defining value for the state. Now's the time to flag for staff if board members have thoughts desired to be included in the process or plan.

- Recommendations

The Plan Committee would engage other board members over the coming months, on the visioning and goals that are in the statute, rule and action plan. This would be preparations for kicking off strategic planning this summer.

Board Questions: none

Action: The Plan Committee will engage all board members on background material, vision and goals to develop ideas and direction for the strategic planning process.

Action: Staff will create space on the website for information about the strategic planning process and how public input can be provided.

Other Business

Discussion of broadband service, unserved areas and build standard—Jeff

- Debrief Background

In early 2020, ConnectMaine stuck with the designation of broadband service as 25/3mbps. These are designated annually, with a 30-day comment period, so it's time to set a process; recommendation to have staff prepare a discussion for the April meeting. This is a lot of work, but it's helpful to have staff look at the connections among these three things.

- Proposed timeline

Discussion and possible approval of process at the April meeting. Targeting May vote on the designation of broadband service.

Board Questions:

- Fred: What's the urgency?

Jeff: I've thought about this before the pandemic and driven by the pandemic—the current designation of broadband service grossly understates the lack of broadband in the state. We should get input on the designation before making it. Nick: Unsure whether annual review is frequent enough or not. There's opportunity to take lessons learned from pandemic about the needs are. Susan: We're seeing significant funds coming to the state; if not now, then when? It's a great time to make significant changes, echoed by Fred.

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- Nick: Staff can do this?

Jeff: The build standard isn't in statute or rule and it was needed simply because the broadband service designation was so low no one would build to only that. There's urgency to avoid having our hands tied by the designation of broadband service; we don't want the legislature to define it for us.

Liz: Support having staff come up with recommendations and background information about the relation to federal standards for broadband and how the pandemic has changed our perspectives on broadband needs.

Jasmine: Senator letter to set modern broadband standard, <https://www.bennet.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?id=2C769043-69ED-426B-B30A-57981A4BA333>. Stephenie: thumbs up on action.

- Nick: Whether now or later, how should the designation of broadband service be determined, considering the use of broadband—it's a functional definition not a technical one.

Action: Staff will propose a process for designating broadband service with public engagement, and the relationship to designating unserved areas and determining the build standard, for board discussion at the April meeting.

Discussion of April Agenda—Nick

- Community broadband planning grants

Balancing staff capacity and encouraging community planning. \$200,000 was budgeted, and less than \$100,000 was awarded so far. The application materials could be improved with regard to clarity. Targeting an application window that would open at April meeting and close in late May for June awards.

- Annual budgeting

Maybe not April but in the May-June timeframe for approving a FY22 budget

Action: Staff will work with grants committee to revise applications materials, determine available funds, for the board to open an application window in April.

Public Comments

- Peggy: Appreciate the participation of Ben Sanborn and Melinda Kinney during the legislative worksession on LD 83.

Nick: It was a good explanation for the committee of the various intricacies involved.

- Ben Sanborn, TAM: Are committee meetings and work open to the public?

Peggy: Memos capture committee work for discussion and action at the monthly meetings.

- Sanborn: Memo sent to ConnectMaine on grants program; will all applications and scoring materials be made public?
- Sanborn: TAM pitches for an open dialog, echoed by Melinda Kinney, Charter.

Nick: Transparency and accessibility is also on the list of tasks for the governance committee. Welcome further conversation about structuring an open dialog meeting.

Approval of adjournment: Liz motioned, Susan 2nd, unopposed

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February Meeting Notes

25 February 2021

Temporary Recording: https://networkmaine.zoom.us/rec/share/sPjnzYEGhozGcqKcxCl0MSnBHwxatOeJ0_iIXq6oltaGATwpmVFAG8dKDwTNSrXs.G7uIB9SWsboHfrRp

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Introductions of Members and Staff

Liz Wyman, Jeff Letourneau, Jasmine Bishop, Heather Johnson, Susan Corbett, Nick Battista, Peggy Schaffer, Stephenie MacLagan and Emily Atkins

Meeting Kickoff

Broadband Investments—Nick

- Consolidated Communications announced investments in Maine beyond their Rural Digital Opportunity Fund projects
- Governor’s state address, “asking for an additional \$30M bond for broadband”

Notes of Last Meeting

Approval of the January meeting notes: Jeff motioned, Susan second, 5:0, Heather abstained

Review of Operations

Executive Director’s Report—Peggy

- Community-driven broadband planning model, e.g., Maine West Bootcamp

Lot of interest in repeating this model in other areas; however, there’s a lot of coordination effort involved, that Mia Purcell conducted for Maine West with the Northern Forest Center

- Recent presentations and communications plan

A Bangor Daily News series on broadband has started. Presentation to Bangor Chamber of Commerce should be available now. Please read articles posted on the News webpage.

- Presentation to the Appropriations Committee on the budget

Nick, Andrew Butcher and Nancy Smith also testified. The committee hasn’t yet moved on the supplemental budget.

- Status of Project Manager II hire

After meeting with the project management team of OIT this week, suggestion made to interview up to five of them. This would be a shared position with the Department of Economic and Community Development, which has already purchased Salesforce.

ConnectMaine will be investigating the use of Salesforce for some of its grants management activities. Hire will occur in the next couple of weeks.

Board Questions

- Jasmine: Are DECD and ConnectMaine needs aligned?

Peggy: yes. Heather: Getting higher caliber of talent if the position were made fulltime given skills needed. Peggy: The previous work done on mapping DECD needs around Salesforce is informing this.

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Decisions on Policies & Procedures

Review revisions—Peggy

- Policies & Procedures of the Finance Authority of Maine and the Maine Technology Institute were mashed up as a model for ConnectMaine
- Revisions proposed by Jeff

Separating duties, for functionality, given two people or entities involved in the waiver process. Amount of scrutiny increases based on the costs of acquisition. Waivers approved by chair and then those of higher costs requiring full vote to approve.

Board Discussion

- Susan: Jeff's revisions provide guidance while maintaining flexibilities, echoed by Liz
- Nick: Jeff's revisions include structural changes that are helpful, separating the RFP requirements from the waiver requirements
- Nick: These are revisited at least annually

Approval of the ConnectMaine Policies & Procedures for 2021, with Jeff's revisions: Jeff motioned, Susan second, 6:0

Discussion on Operations

Funds to support initiatives around ConnectMaine operations—Nick & Heather

- Governor's support and a grant from the Northern Border Regional Commission
Governor worked to find funds to support broadband and the tools needed to expand broadband. Finding out about this earlier this week, seems germane to these discussions.
- Flexibility remains or opportunities on how to leverage these funds for the purpose of broadband expansion in Maine.

Update from Governance Committee—Jasmine

- Desire to contract for professional assistance

Nick: Questions about communication and workflow among staff and board, roles & responsibilities, decision-making, so the proposal is to seek outside help with potentially drafting bylaws and aligning with staff job descriptions.

- Governance Committee to further this proposal

Susan: Move forward, need to figure this out, echoed by Jeff

Nick: Look to committee and staff to figure out details of timing and dollar amounts for upcoming meetings.

- Modeling from other government entities

Peggy: This isn't rocket science, great models from FAME, MTI, etc. Jeff: Encourage borrowing from other entities, echoed by Nick

Action: Staff and Governance Committee (Jasmine, Liz & Heather) will act quickly to provide sense of direction at the March meeting.

Updates from Committees on RFPs—Peggy & Liz

- Two committees were formed last meeting

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Grants management & accountability has been narrowed to verification & validation. Data management and mapping is now described as a broadband intelligence platform.

- Request for Proposal for grants Verification and Validation is being finalized to be issued end of this week.

The V&V RFP has been further narrowed by separating the two tasks: 1 makes sure that staff and board have technical expertise they need for the application process and task 2 focused on post-grant including field inspection. Bidders can respond to one or both as long as services and costs are separated in the response.

- The RFP for broadband intelligence platform will be based on that one

Further work will occur next week with that committee (Jeff, Fred & Nick) to allow focus on opening the infrastructure grants.

Action: Staff will post RFPs on the ConnectMaine website, email to its providers list and ask State Procurement to post them as well.

Decisions on Infrastructure Grants

Final review of the infrastructure grants program materials by the Grants Committee—Nick

- Stakeholder engagement process recalled

Many changes made based on that process and many iterations have been reviewed and discussed in past meetings. Staff has thought out timing and amount of funds available.

- Some elements of the application and other materials are still clunky

This is partly a product of the ConnectMaine rule, flagging these difficulties, toward improvements. Staff anticipates workshop with potential applicants, tentatively March 10.

Discuss timing for next application window for infrastructure grants—Stephenie

- Provider Outreach requirement

This allows applicants and providers to connect the dots on any plans for broadband expansion, and allows state to efficaciously deploy funds. The timing is triggered by the applicant, so the sooner the applicant outreaches to providers, the sooner providers have to respond, the more time the applicant has to revise their application. Applicants can start on this as soon as the application window opens, regardless of the track used.

- Timing of application windows

The option of a 45-day window doesn't allow applicants to revise project areas after provider outreach, but it allows ConnectMaine to get money out the door faster. The 60-day window, proposed in the binder materials would open today through April 29. Either the 45-day or 60-day windows could be used in the second round of these bond funds.

- Amount available for grants

Staff recommend awarding up to \$7.5 million in this application window, with the remaining bond funds being awarded in the next application window. This is based on very high interest level, expecting dozens of applications even in this first round, but it also allows us to refine the grants program based on what's learned in this application window before deploying the rest of the bond funds.

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Board Discussion

- Jeff: Use two different timelines for the two tracks, shorter one for Provider Expansion Projects and longer for Community-Driven Broadband Projects. Then all applications won't come in at the same time, echoed by Susan and Liz. Stephenie: Few cases where existing providers have plans for Provider Expansion Projects, so shorter timeframe might be possible. It's more for staff to keep track of, but not a big deal.
- Jeff: Set expectation on the amount, as around half of the bond funds, rather than tying ourselves to a ceiling. Liz: Don't want to go so far where future applicants don't feel like ample funds are then available, echoed by Jasmine. Nick: It can help an applicant with sizing a project, to know the pool of funds available.
- Jasmine: If they aren't awarded, will first round applicants be asked to reapply for the second round? Jeff: Feedback should be provided, echoed by Nick. Jeff: Two rounds provides the opportunity—some communities might try to apply in this round but have to revise the project area based on provider outreach that then requires the town to take another vote, so they'd have to apply in the next round.
- Liz: Some applicants are ready now and some are still in the planning stages, but we're not spending all the bond funds at once, so get things started. There should be flexibility for which track an applicant chooses. Nick: Scoring criteria or points are different depending the track, and ConnectMaine can't tell applicants which track is the best fit for their projects.

Approval of opening an application window from today through April 29 for infrastructure grants for community-driven broadband projects, and an application window from today through April 12 for infrastructure grants for provider expansion projects, with the amount of awards totaling about half of the \$15 million bond funds: Jeff motioned, Liz 2nd, 6:0

Public Comments

- Colleen, Minot: Knowing about the amount available is helpful. Trying to figure out which track to use. The 45-day window is doable regardless of the track, but trying to figure out which one will be most successful, echoed by Melinda, Charter, and Brian, Casco Bay Advisors.
- Brian, Casco Bay Advisors: Need 60-day window at a minimum, if provider outreach is required, because mostly like going to have to modify applications based on feedback from providers.
- Chris, Somerville: Town meeting vote approval for matching monies and borrowing, which has notice requirements and timeframes, so the 45-day window might be too short, especially if modifying the size of the project based on provider responses.

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Discuss timing of next application window for infrastructure grants—Stephenie

- Options include the 45-day or 60-day application windows

A 64-day option for the next application window is proposed as June 23 through August 26, with announcement of awards at the September meeting; the 45-day option would be June 23 to August 9. Desire to avoid setting hard & fast timeline for this application window, to ensure lessons learned can be incorporated.

- To spend remaining bond funds
- These discussions are focused on infrastructure grants. Another planning grants window is potential for this spring also but not for discussion today.

Board Discussion

- Liz: Concerned with reality of getting through the first application window, over promising on the timing of the second application window. Nick: Identification of the timing for this round is important for communities that are trying to prepare their meetings in preparing to apply.
- Nick: Intention would be to open the next round as quickly as possible, unless there are major systematic issues to be resolved before then, so late June or maybe into July, then do the 45 or 60 days with award decisions in late August or September, support echoed by Jasmine & Liz.

Other Business

Foreshadow strategic planning in-depth discussion for March meeting—Nick

- The current triennial plan expires before the Feb '22 meeting; now is the time to be thinking about the process and what content to cover.

Staff has created an outline from required elements for triennial plans, and included initiatives discussed by staff, board and stakeholders, as well as building from the state action plan, climate council and economic recovery committee reports. Lots of interest in understanding the economic value of broadband expansion, and grants scoring categories, and process to talk through a bunch of things even if they don't end up in the plan.

- Further discussion at March meeting

Importance to pull in lessons learned from recent stakeholder engagement process

Action: Staff propose timeline and further direction to discuss at March meeting

Public Comments

None

Approval of adjournment: Liz motioned, unopposed

Executive Director's Report

24 March 2021

Peggy Schaffer, Executive Director

Authority Members

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

Active grant awards

Almost all planning projects awarded grants have commenced. Sanford continues to work on their broadband feasibility study. Franklin County's broadband feasibility study or progress report is overdue, but all other projects started before last fall have been completed.

Local and regional planning support

We have met with Northport and a newish group in Midcoast (that might include Northport) on their processes. We budgeted for a second round of planning grants this year. Staff will be making a recommendation to open up a spring round of planning grants at the April board meeting, with likely a May or June decision. Based on our learning, we will continue to clarify and simplify the planning applications to help communities really use this effort to progress.

Staff and program management

Infrastructure grants program workshop for potential applicants had over 80 registrants. Staff continue to provide assistance to applicants and met with the Grants Committee. We have posted the workshop online, along with the slides and the question and answers provided in the chat.

The results of the request for proposals for Grants Verification & Validation will be discussed as an agenda item. We had one response. The Broadband Intelligence Platform RFP was released last week. We will be hosting a question and answer session on March 29th for that RFP. For the Project Manager II position with ConnectMaine and DECD, OIT project management office has hired Woodline Gedeon. We look forward to working with her very soon!

State legislative activities

Our budget has been reported out from the EUT Committee as a split vote, 8 in favor and 4 with an amendment that would use the 10-cent surcharge expanded to cellphones (~\$1.1M) to fund satellite service through a rebate program at the PUC. The Appropriations Committee has not taken up that report yet in their worksessions.

Bills are coming out faster now, and we testified yesterday "neither for nor against" on a bill from Rep. Riesman, who is part of the Denmark planning committee that was in the Maine West bootcamp. The bill would use 100/100mbps to define unserved areas, in statute, which wouldn't allow flexibility to respond to changing markets.

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Federal funding update

NTIA is charged with administering the most recent coronavirus relief funds. There is about \$300M in this pot. Timeline is late spring for the Notice of Funding Opportunity and application being released. They had a webinar March 17:

- The focus is on “cost effective rural locations” that are unserved census blocks at 25/3mbps.
- They will be using the National Broadband Availability Map as one source of information, of which Maine has been part of since 2018. We provide them with additional state level data.
- Applications will not include any RDOF or USDA areas.

Staff emailed internet service providers to ascertain participation in the FCC’s Emergency Broadband Benefit program that subsidizes internet service for low-income households. ConnectMaine tries to promote federal programs and leverage other funds to the benefit of Mainers. Most are looking at it very seriously; Premium Choice Broadband has agreed to join; others probably have too at this point.

The more recently passed American Rescue Plan includes a wide variety of funds that can be used for broadband, among other things.

- Notably, towns and counties are getting funds where broadband is specifically an allowable use.
- Additionally, that same section of the bill included \$10B for Treasury for “infrastructure.” Senator King was instrumental at getting this language in and has been working diligently with Senator Warner’s staff to make sure Treasury and the White House both understand the intent was to provide block grants to state programs.
- Treasury has 60 days to produce rules and guidelines. We do not know specifically what those will look like yet.
- This is potentially, especially when combined with the county and municipal funds, a historic opportunity to invest in expanding infrastructure, digital literacy and affordability in Maine.

ConnectMaine presented an overview of the new federal funds that can potentially be used for connectivity at a webinar on Monday morning, with Senator King kicking it off with about 70 people in attendance. Recording available from Maine Broadband Coalition.

Federal legislative activities

We continue to give feedback to our delegation on a lot of bills. We met with Congresswoman Pingree’s staff on ReConnect and other infrastructure bills coming from the House.

Strategic Planning Process

24 March 2021

Plan Committee

Authority Members

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

Background

The ConnectMaine Authority is required to generate periodic reports and plans, which highlight its activities. ConnectMaine is directed to prepare a detailed, triennial strategic plan for broadband service to carry out its statutory duties, goals and policies. This plan includes building from vision and goals set forth in the State of Maine Broadband Action Plan and the last triennial plan. ConnectMaine statute requires that this plan include activities, measures of performance and timelines to achieve those goals. Other required components include budget allocations, a definition of broadband and other relevant information.

The current triennial plan expires on 22 February 2022. The ConnectMaine statute requires that these plans are posted on a publicly accessible website 90 days before the date on which they will be adopted by vote of the ConnectMaine Authority. A public hearing at least 30 days before the vote is also required including an opportunity for written comments.

The state's Economic Development Strategy, the Governor's Economic Recovery Committee and the state's Climate Action Plan also build on the Broadband Action Plan. The recommendations and activities of these various sources will also be revisited.

Recommendation

The ConnectMaine Plan Committee recommends using this process as an opportunity to engage the public in ConnectMaine activities, beyond the minimum requirements of the statute for public input on the plan. Given that the plan must be publicly posted by October 27th for a vote at the January meeting, this committee recommends working within the board over a couple of months and then kicking off the strategic planning process this summer.

To prepare for this process, the Plan Committee recommends that the ConnectMaine Authority works through background material, vision and goals. Developing the ideas for the next triennial plan will provide something for the public to respond to, and making the direction forward clearer will help the public provide input and engage with ConnectMaine during strategic planning.

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The strategic planning process will build from the recent stakeholder engagement on infrastructure grants. One lesson learned from that process was creating multiple opportunities for input on documents or decisions made by ConnectMaine. The Plan Committee will continue to develop a timeline of engagement activities that will kick off this summer.

Discussion

Reviewing the broadband vision and goals, and developing ideas and providing direction to achieve those goals, seems to fit under three themes:

1. ConnectMaine operational model for supporting local public-private partnerships,
2. other potential business models for broadband expansion, and
3. the extent of broadband availability and performance criteria of broadband.

The Plan Committee would engage board members in revisiting the broadband goals under these themes.

Action

While votes aren't required, the Plan Committee seeks agreement on these next steps proposed.

Action: The Plan Committee will engage all board members on background material, vision and goals to develop ideas and direction for the strategic planning process.

Action: Staff will create space on the website for information about the strategic planning process and how public input can be provided.