

# CONNECTMAINE

## I. Applicant Information

Applicant Signature: 

Date Submitted: *October 29, 2021*

### A. Fiscal Agent

Please use the same entity that was provided on the W-9 Form.

Entity Name: *Kennebec Valley Council of Governments (KVCOG)*

### B. Grant

Grant Amount Awarded: *\$5,000.00*

### C. Affected Communities

List a point of contact for each community involved in the planning work.

*Please note: The "Affected Communities" listed in the original grant proposal were Freedom, Liberty, Montville, and Palermo. Since then, the town of Searsmont has joined the Coalition, bringing the total number of Affected Communities to five (5) with a combined population of 5588 (2010 Census).*

Community	Name	Title or Role	Email or Phone
Freedom	Elaine Higgins	Select Board Member	ehigg29@gmail.com
Liberty	Joe Meadows	Appointed Representative	joe@meadoasis.com
Palermo	Bob Kurek	Select Board Chair	kurekbob@yahoo.com
Montville	Vernon LeCount	Appointed Representative	hvlecount@yahoo.com
Palermo	Peter Milinazzo	Select Board Member	selectmanmilinazzo@gmail.com

### D. Applicant or Agent

Name: *Wilson G. Hess*

Title or Role: *SWBC Member, Grant Liaison*

Mailing Address: *465 Belfast Rd.*

Phone Number: *207-249-7670*

Email Address: *wghess@fairpoint.net*

### E. Partner, if any

Company Name:

Point of Contact Name:

Title:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

# CONNECTMAINE

## II. Executive Summary

Review the executive summary of the application, and revise if necessary.

*The following excerpts from the Executive Summary in the application each contain brief comments that are expanded upon throughout the report.*

The Phase I planning cycle will focus on community engagement: identifying priorities, communicating with stakeholders, interacting with current and prospective providers, further coalition building, and seeking formal commitments from the affected communities.

- 1) The Coalition will develop and implement an effective communication plan, including the use of systematic surveys of all four affected communities, including, public entities, businesses, anchor institutions, non-profits, potential collaborators, donors, stakeholders, and the general public.

*The Coalition developed a multi-faceted communication plan with volunteer committees leading efforts in Community Outreach among our member towns & the general public and Coalition Outreach to surrounding towns, nearby broadband initiatives, and the Waldo County Commissioners (the latter with special attention to ARPA County funds).*

- 2) The Coalition will engage in extensive community building, communication, and surveys fact-finding that will be a precondition to public meetings on broadband expansion. This effort will be characterized by:

- a) community meetings within each affected community

*Due to the extended nature of the pandemic, the Coalition adopted a strategic of bi-monthly Zoom meetings which have been widely attended. Face-to-face community meetings were limited to the summer months due to public meeting restrictions under the Governor's executive order which prevailed until June 30th. Total count of unduplicated participants in face-to-face meetings in our five communities was 142.*

- b) socially-distanced face-to-face meetings with elected and appointed leaders, influencers, private sector stakeholders, prospective donors, and public officials. *Sen. "Chip" Curry (Sen. District 11) and Rep. Stanley Zeigler (House District XX) have been active in their support. Each town has an appointed representative to the SWCBC Board and they report back regularly. Some 42 influential local citizens and stakeholders have participated as on-going "members" in our open forums, performed volunteer functions, and served on our five committees.*

*A major accomplishment of this outreach was ongoing testimony before and engagement with the Waldo County Commissioners which resulted in \$100,000 of ARPA pass-through funds coming to our towns in the form of \$20,000 grants to each.*

- c) social media, web-presence, You-Tube, Zoom, and other internet-based resources. *Internet-based resources included the development of a web page setting forth the benefits of broadband and prominent link to the Maine Broadband Coalition Speed Test (482 speed tests recorded).*

# CONNECTMAINE

- d) Outreach to existing and alternate providers  
*The ISP Outreach Committee held meetings with existing providers: Consolidated Communications and Spectrum/Charter Communications as well as Axiom, DownEast Broadband, GWI, and LCI. Recordings of these meetings were archived on the Coalition's Groups.IO page and are available to all members.*
- e) A comprehensive approach to engaging businesses and better understanding their needs in a systematic fashion.  
*The SWCBC outreach to businesses was by in-person connections, solicitation of letters of support, (unpaid) sponsorships on the SWCBC webpage, survey participation, and public meetings. We were gratified by the support in all these forums.*
- f) Neighboring unserved towns in southwestern Waldo County may also be engaged.  
*Three Waldo County towns expressed interest in our joining our efforts. Searsmont, a contiguous community, joined the Coalition in June 2021. Their contributions have significantly strengthened our Coalition.*
- 3) A litmus test for public support will be approaching the four (4) [sic] member towns for modest levels of support through their town budget process. Town meetings in the spring of 2021 will likely provide the first opportunity for voter expressions of support coalition-wide.  
*Each member town approved funding of an unrestricted \$500 disbursement to SWCBC through its regular town meeting budget process.*  
*Each member town approved – either through a special town meeting or Select Board action – disbursements from the Waldo County pass-through ARPA monies to fund a feasibility study.*  
*Estimated cost is approximately \$60,000, pending the results of an RFP process.*

The major outcome of Phase I of the planning cycle will be the emergence of an effective and informed collaborative effort leading prepared to break through the “Balkanization” of our broadband service divide and proceed to a Phase II planning cycle which will produce a feasibility study with a shared plan for implementation and funding.

*A brief listing of highlights suggests the extensive nature of community supports:*

- *630 local citizens in the SWCBC survey, representing 19.2% of total “passings” and 11.2% of total population in the five towns took part in a web-based survey.*
- *Our website received 1398 unique visits, equivalent to 25% of the population of the five communities.*
- *Unanimous town support for the feasibility study RFP process & funding.*
- *Feasibility Study RFP has been distributed to prospective consultants.*
- *Ongoing discussion with town Select Boards on balance of ARPA pass-through funds for use in creating an Interlocal Agreement as the basis for forming a non-profit utility district.*
- *Initial discussions with town Select Boards regarding their ARPA-direct town grants totaling in excess of \$600,000.*

# CONNECTMAINE

### III. Community Support

A community-driven broadband process relies on widespread engagement and support. 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 who contribute relevant backgrounds and roles.

*SWCBC has been extremely fortunate in developing a strong, energetic volunteer base, active participation on each of its six (6) working committees, and talented, appointed representatives from each of our five towns to lead its governing Board. The selected individuals listed below merely illustrate the much wider distribution and depth of membership and its contributions.*

*There has been widespread interest and support throughout our combined communities (population 5588). Our digital community survey had 630 respondents (representing 19.2% of our total residences) including 194 comments. Our website received 1398 unique visits. 482 community members participated in the Maine Broadband Coalition Speedtest based upon our appeals on our website, in our mailings and local fliers. At least 142 community members attended our public information sessions, town public hearings, and special town meetings across the five towns.*

Background	Name
an official representing the affected community, including a local elected official with political will to support broadband	<p><i>The SWCBC Board consists of appointed representatives from each of the five member towns, including elected select board members from three towns. See I.C. (above)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sen. Glenn “Chip” Curry (Sen. District 11) Senate Chair, Maine Legislature’s Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business. Sen. Curry has attended membership meetings, addressed the ISP Outreach Committee, and presented supporting testimony to the Waldo County Commissioners on behalf of SWCBC.</i></li> <li>• <i>Rep. Stanley Zeigler (House District 96) has attended public information forums, special town meetings, and written letters of support.</i></li> </ul>
an educator who cares about educational opportunities around broadband	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Eleanor Hess, Vice-Chair RSU#3 School Board, retired middle school Teacher and college/ university instructor, SWCBC Outreach Committee</i></li> </ul>

# CONNECTMAINE

<p>someone in economic development, including a local business owner, including someone from an industry that's important to the affected community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Joe Meadows, Founder and CEO of Think Patients (a leading specialty consulting firm focused on electronic product identity, health IT, Electronic Health Records, and communications for the biopharmaceutical and digital health industries). Developed SWCBC survey and Feasibility Study RFP.</i></li> </ul>
<p>someone who depends on broadband, including a teleworker, including a student, including a healthcare provider</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tammy MacTaggart, teleworker, web developer for health firm, Secretary SWCBC</i></li> </ul>
<p>a key individual to any such project, including someone who's integral to the fabric of the affected community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Wilson Hess, Chair, Maine Charter School Commission, Chair Maine State Board of Education Legislative Action Committee, retired Professor of History and college/ university president, SWCBC member providing liaison on government relations.</i></li> </ul>
<p>a deep diver into broadband, including someone with information technology expertise, including someone with policy expertise</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Christian Halstead, Director, Earth Resources Information at Maine Geological Survey, former MDEP Sr. GIS Programmer/ Analyst, SWCBC Technology Committee</i></li> </ul>
<p>a finance expert, including someone with banking expertise, including someone with public-private partnership experience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bob Kurek, Select Board Chair (Palermo), Member Waldo County Budget Committee, Chair and Co-founder SWCBC, retired corporate financial Controller</i></li> </ul>
<p>a communicator, both within the committee and from the committee</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Phil Bloomstein, retired secondary school educator and IT administrator, Chair Community Outreach Committee</i></li> </ul>
<p>an energizer, who diversifies and brings together the group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Peter Milinazzo, Select Board member (Searsmont), Member SWCBC Board representing a large additional population, retired YMCA executive.</i></li> <li>• <i>Vernon LeCount, Senior Communications Consultant at Twitchell Enterprises, SWCBC Board member (Montville)</i></li> </ul>
<p>a visionary, who drives the process forward and keeps it upbeat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Elaine Higgins, Select Board Member (Freedom), Co-founder and Board member of SWCBC, Member Waldo County Budget Committee, retired welding &amp; fabrication business owner</i></li> </ul>

# CONNECTMAINE

## A. Planning Activities

Briefly describe the effect of planning activities on building wide community support, including but isn't limited to the following:

- putting together a broadband committee covering relevant backgrounds and essential roles, *See Sec. IV.B "Technology/Fiber Mapping Committee," p. 14.*
- compiling community surveys
- *There has been widespread interest and support throughout our combined communities (population 5588). Developed by an accomplished survey designer from the Coalition Board, the SWCBC community survey's widespread support included 630 respondents (representing 19.2% of our total residences), including 194 comments. This data was customized in reports to member towns and will be invaluable in the upcoming feasibility study, network design, and operating/business models.*
- identifying anchor institutions and community members to be engaged, and *See Sec. IV.B "Community Outreach Committee," p. 14.*
- building financial support for broadband planning and expansion. *The SWCBC grant proposal described modest levels of support through the town budget process as a "litmus test" for community support. At this point in our development, we have exceeded that threshold significantly, largely due to the unanticipated nature of ARPA funding. Not only did each member town make an initial \$500 per town allotment in their annual budgets, but outreach and testimony to Waldo County Commissioners resulted in pass-through APRAs awards of \$20,000 per town, which includes their commitments to fund the feasibility study. The SWCBC is currently engaged in initial discussions with town Select Boards regarding their ARPA-direct town grants totaling in excess of \$600,000.*

## B. Regional Collaboration

Briefly describe the regional collaborations or partnerships formed among communities, local or regional nonprofits providing economic development programs, or private-sector stakeholders. If none, then describe the challenges to date and future efforts that will be undertaken.

- 1) *Our five-member Coalition Board, consisting of appointed representatives from the five member towns, constitute our governing Board, which is the core of our organizational structure and decision-making processes.*
- 2) *Island Institute – We are indebted to the Island Institute for providing consulting advice, sharing an understanding of its community-driven Broadband Process Model, offering informative testimony to the Waldo County Commissioners, and contributing to our community leaders' understanding about the complex process of bringing broadband to our communities.*
- 3) *KVCOG – The Kennebec Council of Governments is a leader for local and regional economic development and planning within the Kennebec Valley region. It supports local governments, and even though not all of our member towns fall within KVCOG's service area, they agreed to serve as our fiscal sponsor and provide advisory support and professional services.*
- 4) *VETRO Cares – VETRO, a Maine-based internet software and mapping company, has partnered with SWCBC as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cohorts of its VETRO Cares initiative.*



# CONNECTMAINE

*VETRO Cares provides cohort members with no-cost access to the VETRO internet infrastructure intelligence platform, support services, and design resources.*

- 5) *Town of Searsmont – the four town SWCBC was honored when Searsmont decided to join our coalition in June 2021. Their expertise, energy, and professionalism have greatly strengthened our effort.*

## **IV. Project Focus**

As a separate file, to be shared publicly on the ConnectMaine website, submit a copy of any Community Broadband Plan or other result from this planning work. Alternatively, please address any of the following that was generated during this planning work:

- a description of local broadband needs and goals;  
*Both quantitative and qualitative indicators speak to the lack of broadband service throughout our communities.*
  - *Our speed test data and “crowdsourcing” mapping has thoroughly established that, throughout, our five towns are nearly totally “underserved” and in many places “unserved” (see Figures IV.1,2, and 3).*
  - *In our survey “internet speed” received an average score of 32 on a scale of 100 and “reliability” an average score of 39. Survey comments regarding slow speed were abundant. Coalition strategy is founded in the goal of bringing affordable broadband internet service to the towns of Freedom, Liberty, Montville, Palermo and Searsmont. The strategy calls for providing reliability and speeds that are required by homes, businesses, telecommuters, students of all ages, telehealth users, municipalities and residents. Our intended service is fiber to the premises (FTTP) at speeds of at least 100/100 Mbps.*
- Inventory of the existing infrastructure assets;  
*The existing ConnectME mapping was augmented by SWCBC volunteers, providing new or corrected information at the residence point, drop line, and fiber service line level. For instance, an address point at an abandoned residence that shouldn't have been included or perhaps a service line going down an abandoned road. The layering of this GIS mapping allowed SWCBC members to click on a road and update the service speed in any given area based on local knowledge. The SpeedTest results pointing to locations from the Maine Broadband Coalition are shown in Figure IV.1. The SpeedTest layer was also incorporated into SWCBC Service Level chart (Figure IV.2) and map (Figure IV.3). This "crowdsourcing" of information, we believe, leads to more accurate representation of the unserved and underserved areas in the five towns. Summary statistics and a listing of roads by service category are in an embedded SHP file that has been uploaded along with a spreadsheet document, both submitted separately. The hope is that with the supplemental information provided by SWCBC members' collective knowledge and effort, a more sound, defensible understanding of the unserved and underserved nature of the Coalition's five towns can be achieved.*

# CONNECTMAINE

Figure IV.1  
SWCBC Maine Broadband Coalition Speedtest Data

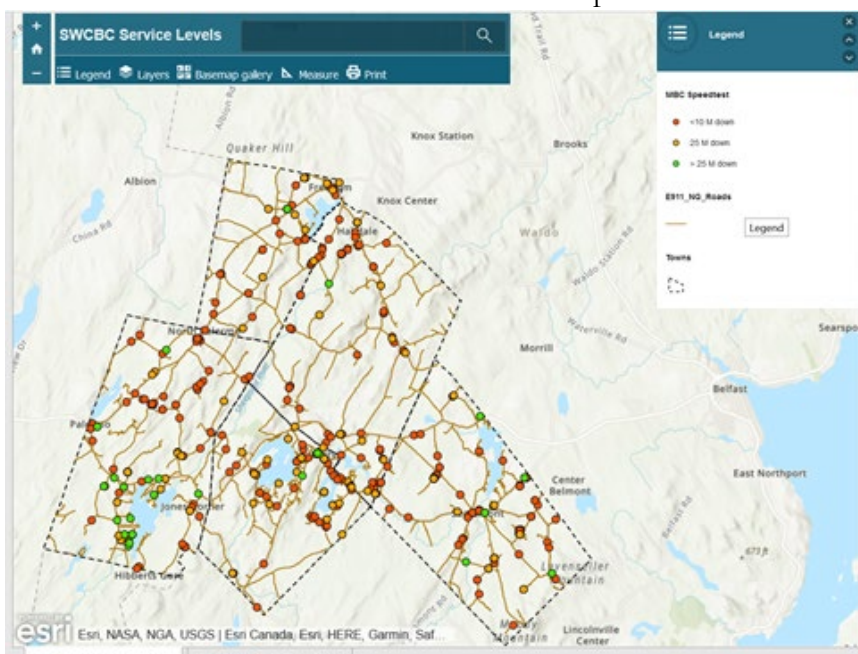


Figure IV.2  
Updated SWCBC Service Level Statistics

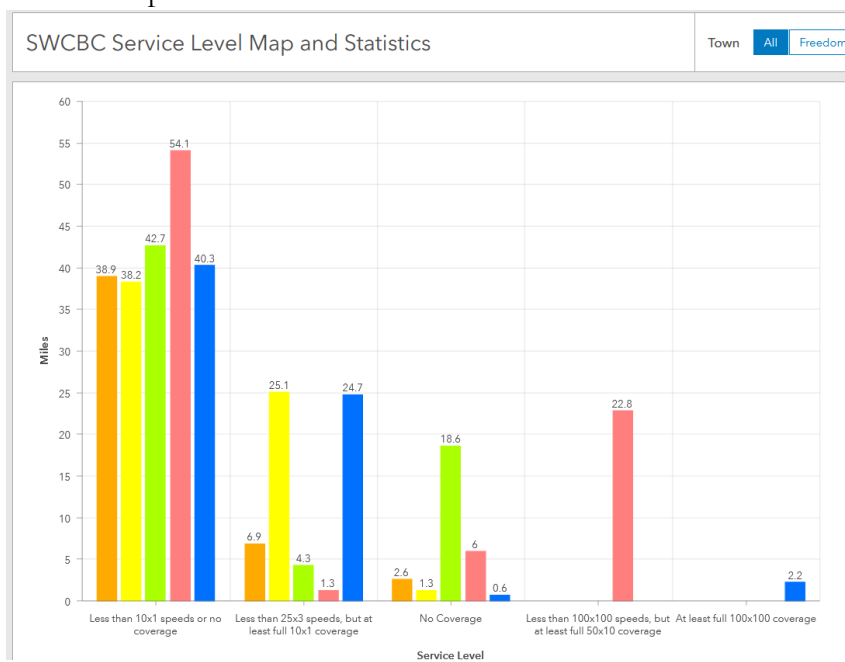
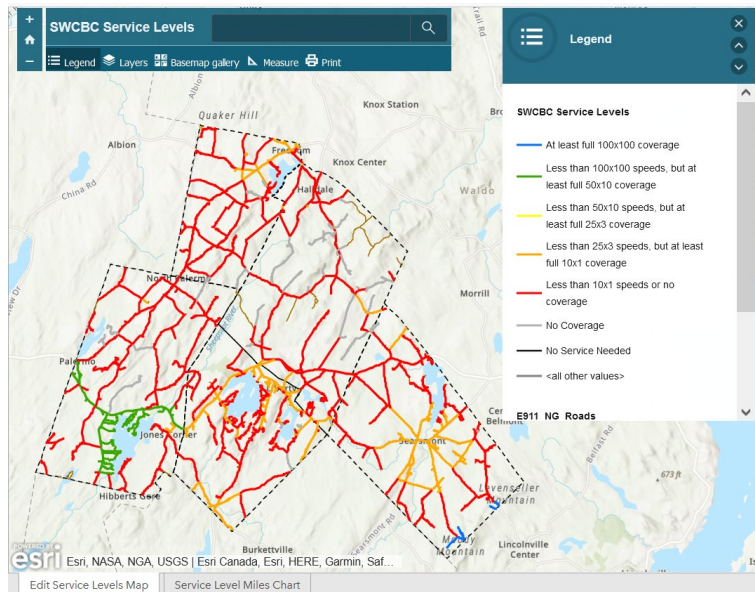


Figure IV.3  
Updated SWCBC Service Level Map

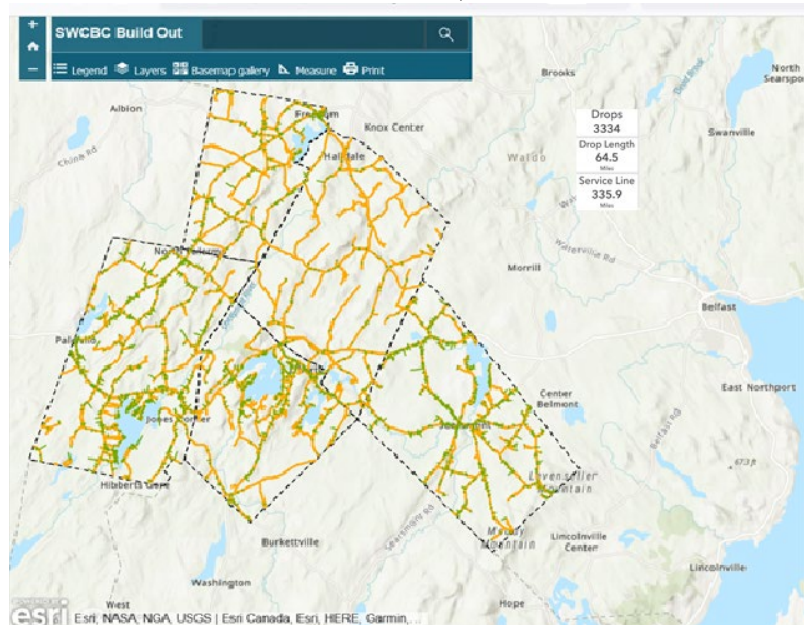


# CONNECTMAINE



- a gap analysis defining the additional broadband infrastructure necessary to meet identified needs and goals;  
*The Build Out projection displays the likely paths to reach all residents with fiber in the five towns. The shortest drop path from the road to each residence is also displayed. These data are summarized in the software and its embedded data sheet to allow for quick, easy cost estimation to inform the planned feasibility study for which an RFP has already been issued.*

Figure IV.4  
Build Out Projection



- description of any franchise agreement with a cable provider, including the expectations for expanding infrastructure and the expiration date;

# CONNECTMAINE

*None.*

- 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 *SWCBC board members are appointed by the respective towns and they each conducted, or had town officers conduct on their behalf, reviews of municipal procedures, policies, rules, and ordinances that might impact broadband infrastructure deployment. In such small towns, it should be little surprise that in each case town officials found no relevant procedures, policies, rules, or ordinances that would impact the timing of or cost of broadband infrastructure development.*
- a strategy to promote digital inclusion that addresses affordable internet service and equipment, digital literacy and public computer access.

*The Coalition's current strategy is founded on the goal of bringing affordable broadband internet service to the towns of Freedom, Liberty, Montville, Palermo and Searsmont that will provide the reliability and speeds required by homes, businesses, telecommuters, students of all ages, telehealth users, municipalities and residents.*

*The SWCBC vision is to work together to provide the rural and underserved communities of southwestern Waldo County with access to affordable high-speed broadband internet service in order to provide educational equity, remote job accessibility, business opportunities, and access to quality healthcare services.*

*When this grant was awarded, broadband speeds were defined by the federal government as 25Mbps download/ 3Mbps upload (25/3). Service of 50/10Mbps is now defined by ConnectME as undeserved. Our intended service is fiber to the premises (FTTP) at speeds of at least 100/100 Mbps. While a convenience to many, broadband is a necessity for businesses, community services, telehealth services, students, and individuals who work from home. Universal access is essential for connecting and sustaining Maine's rural communities.*

*SWCBC's preferred implementation plan is through a non-profit corporation that owns the assets (such as fiber optic cable and system facilities) and provides high speed broadband utility service to consumers throughout the five communities. The non-profit corporation would be formed by an interlocal agreement between the towns. It would be governed by a Board of Directors that represents the residents of the SWCBC towns of Freedom, Liberty, Montville, Palermo and Searsmont. Either an operations management company or an internet service provider would be contracted to oversee day-to-day operations.*

*The currently preferred funding objective is that any regional utility formed by the towns of the Southwestern Waldo County Broadband Coalition will not seek revenues from town property taxes. Instead, resources would come from federal, state, private foundation, and individual grants and gifts -- especially during the creation phase of the regional utility and during the initial build-out phase.*

# CONNECTMAINE

*Additional resources would come in the form of revenue bonds issued by the regional utility and paid back from customer fees.*

*As a non-profit corporation, no individuals or businesses would earn a profit from the regional utility's operations. Any surplus of revenues over expenses would be retained by the regional utility for operations, maintenance and growth.*

*SWCBC has issued an RFP for a feasibility study, funded by ARPA pass-through monies made available to the towns through Waldo County. In addition, SWCBC will be applying for a Phase II Planning Grant which would incorporate results from the feasibility study and network mapping, to produce formal cost estimates, operating/business models, and network design solutions. Outcomes would include the final determination on an interlocal agreement and a formal build out design. The intent is to complete that planning stage by July 1, 2022.*

## **A. Project Area**

As a separate file, submit any maps of the extent of broadband service availability in the project area, at a fine enough scale to identify street-level data, and also submit the GIS data behind any maps as separate SHP (preferred) or annotated KMZ files. Alternatively, describe the areas covered by this planning project; what areas are unserved or underserved?<sup>2</sup> 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/>
- Community Broadband Plans posted on the ConnectMaine website, if geographic areas are delineated based on a service level of at least 50/10mbps being unavailable: [www.maine.gov/connectme/grants/planning-grants/awards](http://www.maine.gov/connectme/grants/planning-grants/awards)
- The 2021 Reviewed Areas, if these weren't awarded infrastructure grants since: [www.maine.gov/connectme/communities-resources/Broadbandmapping](http://www.maine.gov/connectme/communities-resources/Broadbandmapping)

*SWCBC has uploaded maps and data separately as SHP files. ConnectME officials have acknowledged receipt of the upload and given preliminary indication that these areas will be listed as eligible project areas in the next application window for infrastructure grants. Our data (3325 passings throughout 343 road miles) yields an average of 9.7 passings/mile.*

## **B. Project Engagement**

Describe the strategy for how local leaders, residents and businesses of affected communities are being educated and engaged in broadband planning, and the strategy for how internet service providers in the region have been or will be engaged in future planning or broadband expansion.

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<sup>2</sup> 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 50mbps/10mbps, and areas are designated as underserved where less than 20% of the households have access to internet service of at least 50mbps/10mbps.

# CONNECTMAINE

*Our outreach and engagement plans were modified by extended pandemic conditions and restrictions. Nevertheless, each of our small communities were highly engaged in our outreach efforts.*

- *From December 2021 forward, the Coalition held twice-monthly open plenary sessions as a collective of all interested parties, which organized coalition work, engaged in consensus-making, and reported on events.*
- *An active “membership” of 51 individuals was formed from attendees who attended multiple meetings, registered for a groups.io mailing list, or participated in the Searsmont working group, thus becoming the core communication vehicle.*
- *A Board of Directors was formed with each director being appointed by their local town Selectboard (three directors are members of their respective select board).*
- *Six committees were formed to conduct key portions of the Coalition’s work, two of which had direct responsibility for outreach.*
  - *Community Outreach Committee (six members):*

*Designed, implemented, and maintain a web page (<https://www.swaldobroadband.org>) which included:*

    - *“Benefits of Broadband,” prominent multiple links to Maine Broadband Coalition Speed Test (482 speed tests recorded), “News Updates,” monthly “What are we Working on Now?” features, FAQs, and “Useful Links to Help you Better Understand and Use the Internet in Your Daily Life.”*
      - *total unique visits: 1398; 1084 traceable to the SWCBC mailing campaigns*

*Organized and conducted a mailing campaign to all addresses in the 5 town Coalition.*

    - *The three major mailings addressed (in order of sending):*
      - *general information about the coalition*
      - *general news and updates about the Coalition*
      - *encouragement to participate in informational meetings, public hearings, and special town/select board meetings among the 5 towns.*
    - *All mailings pointed recipients to the webpage and MBC Speed Test.*
  - *Coalition Outreach Committee (4 members):*
    - *Outreach to communities included:*
      - *Public information sessions/public hearings: Montville 8/23; Palermo 9/10; Freedom 9/18; Searsmont; 9/21 Liberty 9/30*
      - *Encouraging town support through warrants funding the initial \$500 per town allotment*
      - *Outreach and testimony to Waldo County Commissioners funding the pass-through APRA awards of \$20,000 per town*
      - *Initial outreach with each own’s Select Board regarding their ARPA direct-to-town grants, totaling in excess of \$600,000*
    - *Outreach to area coalitions included:*

# CONNECTMAINE

- *Midcoast Broadband Coalition*
- *Lincolntonville Broadband Committee*
- *ISP Outreach Committee (6 members) held meetings with existing area providers: Consolidated Communications and Spectrum/Charter Communications as well as Axiom, GWI, and LCI. Recordings of these meetings were archived on the Coalition's Groups.IO page and are available to all members.*
- *Non-Profit Public Regional Utility (NPRU) Exploration Committee (6 members)*  
*The NPRU examined models for developing a non-profit regional utility, closely examined the Midcoast Broadband model, DownEast Broadband model, and worked with Maine Association for Non-Profits and a pro-bono attorney to produce a draft interlocal agreement which is still under review.*
- *Technology/Fiber Mapping Committee (7 members)*
  - *Oversaw the SWCBC mapping initiative:*
    - *Coordinated SWCBC "crowdsourcing" volunteers, vetting residence point, drop line, and fiber service line feature information.*
    - *Collaborated with VETRO for mapping techniques and standards*
    - *Performed GIS mapping, including inclusion of MBC Speedtest data*
    - *Assured conformity with ConnectME upload standards for eligible project area designation filing*
  - *Overseeing the Feasibility Study Process*