



**Town of Whitingham
Broadband Committee**

MINUTES OF JANUARY 22, 2020

These Minutes shall be accepted into the public record (with any corrections noted) at a future meeting of the Whitingham Broadband Committee (WBC).

The Whitingham Broadband Committee (WBC) held a regular meeting on Wednesday, January 22, 2020 at 6:30 pm in the Main Hall of the Municipal Center, 2948 VT Route 100, Jacksonville, VT.

Committee members present: Wayne Corse, Doug Amidon, Rod Bemis, Phil Edelstein, Michael Edwards, Doug Fruge, Olivia Kennett, Mike Mandracchia, Michael Patton.

Others present: None

Call to Order. Additions or Changes to Agenda.

Phil Edelstein called the meeting to order at 6:30pm. Add review pre-meeting Broadband summary dated 1/17/20 to Item 4 and add Westfield Gas & Electric to Item 6.

Hearing of visitors (for concerns not on the agenda)

none

A motion was made by Michael Edwards to appoint Phil Edelstein as Chair of the WBC, seconded by Wayne Corse, all in favor. A motion was made by Phil Edelstein to appoint Olivia Kennett as Vice-chair of the WBC, seconded by Doug Fruge, all in favor. A motion was made by Rod Bemis to appoint Phil Edelstein as WBC clerk, seconded by Mike Mandracchia, all in favor.

Pre-Meeting Broadband Summary

All members of the WBC received a Pre-meeting Broadband Summary which is being submitted with these Minutes. There were no questions on the Summary.

Review of Windham Regional Commission (WRC) Meeting

The WRC received a \$60,000 VT Innovation grant to do a 6-month broadband feasibility and financial study of 27 Windham County towns. WRC suggested that towns considering joining a CUD warn the town's participation at Town Meeting. No future obligations for the town are required. WRC also suggested towns start surveying residents about current broadband availability and future broadband needs. The WBC will include an educational cover letter in the Whitingham survey. All WBC members will submit survey and cover letter ideas for review at the next WBC meeting. We discussed the possibility and pros/cons of forming a CUD with Halifax and Readsboro and of Jacksonville Electric involvement in fiber broadband service. The WBC is in learning mode for now.

Review Matrix Design Group presentation

All members of the WBC received a copy of the Matrix 10/24/19 presentation and the 9/24/19 proposal to build a fiber optic broadband network in Whitingham. Matrix is offering to finance ~75% of the cost of installing a fiber network and is seeking participation by the town for ~25% of the cost. This is a new broadband business model. WBC will request proposals from other vendors in the future.

Discuss dates for other vendors

Consolidated Communications (CCI) and Westfield Gas & Electric operating as Whip City Fiber, want to make presentations to the WBC. We agreed to delay scheduling more vendor presentations for now and focus on the town survey which is required for all routes to better fiber and others broadband services.

Discuss VTel Wireless

As of the meeting the new VTel cell tower on Streeter Hill Rd is not online. WRC will do coverage testing on town roads to see how much cell phone coverage VTel can provide with 3 towers. With the outdoor modem, most house locations will get a signal. Once the new tower coverage assessment is done WBC will ask VTel about future service improvements and roaming agreements. WBC will provide coverage data on the new tower to the Readsboro broadband committee.

Adjourn

A motion to adjourn was made by Phil Edelstein, seconded by Wayne Corse, all in favor.

Mr. Edelstein adjourned the meeting at 8:31pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Whitingham Broadband Committee Pre-meeting Summary

From:Phil Edelstein (phil_edelstein@yahoo.com)

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Date:Friday, January 17, 2020, 02:02 PM EST

Hello All,

Thank you for volunteering to serve on the Whitingham Broadband Committee (WBC). Our group of nine people has diverse experience in technology, business, financing and regulatory matters and will surely guide Whitingham toward a Broadband future for all homes in town. WBC will explore all internet service technologies (including cellular) and financing mechanisms. WBC will explore all possible ownership structures including the Windham Regional Commission (WRC) fiber project based on the Communication Union District (CUD) legislation recently passed by the state as well as a town ownership structure similar to Jacksonville Electric Co. The WBC will invite internet service companies and other industry experts to our meetings. This week, the Whitingham Selectboard (SB) passed a resolution to participate in the Windham Regional Fiber Project and appointed me as the Town's representative. Wayne Corse, Jenepher Burnell, Gretchen Havreluk, Ali Edelstein and I attended the first WRC meeting in Newfane yesterday. Several members of WBC have already attended meetings of the Deerfield Valley Broadband Working Group which has met several times in Jacksonville. The WBC will coordinate Whitingham activities with these regional broadband groups, if WBC and the SB determine that doing so is in the best interest of Whitingham.

We all know that internet and cell service came late to Whitingham and no single vendor provides 100% coverage to all addresses. Until recently, internet service providers (ISP's) and cell companies invested 100% of the capital required to build DSL, cable, fiber or cell towers and then sold their service but only to the towns, roads and houses the companies chose. Nothing changed in this business model for many years.

About 10 years ago, Vermont Telephone Co, (VTel), a rural, landline telephone company started in 1896, obtained an \$85,000,000 grant from the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to build a fiber network to 16,000 home and businesses near Springfield, VT, connecting 100% of addresses in 15 towns. VTel also received \$35,000,000 in RUS loans to build a network of 150 cell towers to provide cellular internet service to homes and cell phone service to underserved areas of VT. The new VTel tower in Whitingham is the first new tower built by VTel since 2016 and received no government funding. Whitingham is the only VT town that is served by 3 VTel towers. Over the past 5 years, VTel Wireless has donated \$3500 to the Lions Club for new customer referrals and the WBC can be involved with this effort going forward. To my knowledge, the VTel grants and loans were the first funding for ISP projects made by the RUS. Evidently, the RUS is now one of several sources of government funding for CUD's and individual towns to build fiber to the home or possibly other emerging internet technologies.

EC Fiber in central VT built a community owned fiber network (near VTel) with initial funding of \$7,000,000 from local resident investors. EC Fiber presently serves 2500 homes and has raised \$35,000,000 of additional funding from capital markets to expand to 7000 homes over the next 2 years. EC Fiber is not interested in building fiber in Whitingham as we are too far from the hub in Royalton, VT.

In my opinion, the game changer for Whitingham is the willingness of ISP's such as Consolidated Communications Inc (CCI) and fiber network builders such as Matrix Design Services to build and operate fiber networks in "partnership" with CUD's or individual rural towns and to finance ~75% of the capital investment. I believe it is the partnership arrangement that allows the towns to access government funding to cover the remaining 25% of the capital investment required for fiber projects.

For the past 8 years I've served on the Whitingham Planning & Zoning Commission, the Economic Development Group and volunteered with VTel Wireless for Lions Club donations, which has provided me the opportunity to talk broadband with many people. To my knowledge, the following is the present status of wired internet and wireless/cellular service in Whitingham:

- 1) CCI now covers ~ 90% of town with DSL, up from less than 70% as recently as 6 months ago. Service reliability is good in some places and poor in other parts of town. CCI has expressed an interest in the partnership arrangement to build fiber to the home in Whitingham, similar to the fiber project recently completed in Chesterfield, MA. CCI has asked to meet with WBC.
- 2) Matrix, the designer/builder of the early EC Fiber network and a builder of commercial fiber networks for Verizon, AT&T and other large telecom companies is now expanding into the fiber to the home market. Matrix is building a network for Petersham, MA. WBC is welcome to contact Petersham. Attached is the Matrix fiber

presentation made to the SB recently and the draft proposal Matrix submitted to the town. Please review.

3) VTel Wireless serves ~90 Whitingham homes from a tower behind the transfer station and a tower in Halifax. A new VTel tower located on Streeter Hill Rd, the highest point in Whitingham will expand the VTel Wireless coverage area when the tower comes on line next week. VTel provided a test modem so WBC can determine how much coverage the 3 towers will provide. I asked VTel about their plans for roaming on other cell carriers and the possibility of 5G service in the future. VTel towers use the same hardware and software as AT&T. I think VTel is probably the best cell service option for Whitingham. It is unlikely that VTel would build a fiber network in Whitingham due to the distance from the hub in Springfield, VT.

Almira reserved the big room at the Jacksonville Municipal Center for WBC meetings every other Wednesday at 6:30PM. In a separate email, I will send the first WBC agenda so the meeting can be properly warned as WBC meetings will be open to the public.

WBC will be responsible for providing Gig with written agendas 48 hours before each meeting and written Minutes from each meeting no more than 5 days after each meeting. Gig will post the agendas and Minutes on the Town website and other required places. Rod Bemis has graciously offered the conference room at the Riggs Distler office in Jacksonville if the municipal center is booked on WBC meeting nights.

Looking forward to working with all of you on this very important project.

Best regards,

Phil Edelstein
Office/Cell # 914-671-5759

- Whitingham VT Presentation.pdf
462.2kB
- Whitingham Proposal 09-25-2019_18-40-34-421.pdf
2.9MB