



**Town of Whitingham
Office of the Selectboard**

MINUTES OF MARCH 30, 2020

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

The Whitingham Selectboard held a special meeting on Monday, March 30, 2020 at 5:30pm in the Municipal Center, 2948 VT Route 100, Jacksonville, VT and on the Zoom meeting platform.

Selectboard members present: Wayne Wood, Scott Reed, and Craig Hammer in person. Wayne Corse and Phil Edelstein via Zoom.

Others present: Gig Zboray, Selectboard Office Administrator in person. Almira Aekus, Town Clerk; Michael Patton, Michael Edwards, and Seth Boyd, residents; Chris Lynch of Matrix Design Group; Cliff Duncan of Duncan Cable, via Zoom.

Call to Order. Additions or Changes to Agenda

Wayne Wood called the meeting to order at 5:33pm. There was one addition to the agenda to discuss Corona pandemic issues.

Hearing of visitors for concerns not on the agenda no comments

Review WRC survey results

Phil Edelstein prepared a spreadsheet of survey results for Windham Regional Commission Broadband Survey. Over 1,600 already have cable internet (Comcast), cable customers seem to be interested in a lower price product. 40% of people that responded are just looking for a lower price.

Whitingham had the highest participation rate, 69% are “definitely interested” and 26% are “probably interested” in a fiber connection. Most people clicked on the lowest price offering. 156 respondees currently have satellite tv.

Part of the job needed is to educate people about cost comparisons.

There are children in town that do not have suitable internet for the remote learning required during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Cliff Duncan noted that he would like to help or guide us with his professional knowledge. We should consider price point; people want cheaper service.

Michael Edwards said the common customer sees the price go up for no reason, consumers don't trust the provider. Duncan Cable replied that his internet price has never gone up and their quality has gone up over the years.

Review CUD process

Phil Edelstein explained that he feels the CUD process is unwieldy, each town has individual needs and issues. He hasn't found that there would be a cost advantage to the CUD for Whitingham. Whitingham has more buildings per mile than Readsboro, Halifax and Marlboro. We have our own electric company and Riggs Distler which could be advantageous for us. The thing that takes the longest in a fiber project is getting the utility poles ready.

The Selectboard members all agree that going it alone it more advantageous to the town.

Discuss how to reach out to more people interested in fiber by a letter and by working with the school board

We need a number of non-binding agreements to sign up for fiber in order to get this project going. We need 430 homes signed up to make the project viable. Perhaps make an agreement with Jacksonville Electric to take over the sidewalks in exchange for renting space on the poles. The school board could be enlisted in this effort to sign residents up. A \$10 monthly fee could be added to the fiber users bill to cover the cost of any money the town borrows for this project.

Matrix is willing to offer a reduced price to all the families that qualify for "free and reduced lunch" at school.

First step is to do a pole study, which could cost nearly \$70,000. Seth Boyd asked where that money would come from. Mr. Lynch said that study would not happen until the Memorandum of Understanding is signed and funding has been determined.

Discuss Matrix proposal and financing options to build a fiber network soon to aid students with remote learning

Maxtrix will design, build, operate and maintain a fiber project to the whole town, including the outskirts, to be paid for by Matrix Design Group at a cost of about 3 million dollars. The town would have to provide right of way on utilities poles and a place to store the equipment at a cost of just over 1 million dollars. Chris Lynch thinks having Cliff Duncan involved to guide the town is a great service.

Matrix is now offering \$95 for 100 megabits, \$155 for 200 megabits, so they doubled the speed for the same price that was in the proposal to the town dated September 2019. Price increases would have to be approved by the town. They guarantee that their service will always meet or exceed the Federal guidelines for broadband. The town would be able to apply for state and federal grants to lower the town's cost or use loan(s).

The first step to move the project forward is a Memorandum of Understanding, then pursue the town's funding options.

Cliff Duncan noted that someone will have to apply for a Certificate of Public Good (CPG), he doesn't think the state will object. Once the CPG is in possession, he suggests going right to the application process to the utility companies. The CPG is a document that will be a blueprint for how the service will be used and distributed. An attorney will likely need to be

hired. There is an 11-year renewal process required on the CPG. Mr. Lynch noted that once they have the CPG, they can start the project, they still need to minimize the number of poles needed and the logistics of that will far outweigh the cost of the pole survey.

The next step is to write a letter to all residents and property owners about the project requesting feed back of their interest. A Certificate of Public Good will need to be applied for. A Pole Study could be performed by volunteers. The make ready costs would be determined by the utility company that owns the poles and is based on the pole study.

A question was raised as to who would pay the taxes on the project, those costs would be passed on to the user as well as the pole rental and the loan or lease costs. Matrix responded that they would offer the town 3 free accounts as a payment in lieu of taxes. How would the education taxes be paid? The model represents a capital lease to the town. There didn't seem to be a clear opinion of how taxes would be determined but the cost would be passed on to the user.

Mr. Wood asked if this project would go out to bid. Mr. Edelstein answered that there are no other companies that can offer the same that Matrix is offering.

Corona pandemic issues

Municipal Center cleaning subcontractor suspended service

Barb's Cleaning will be suspending her cleaning services for the remainder of the pandemic. She estimates a return around June 1st. The biggest issue is that Senior Meals is still using the kitchen and bathrooms to prepare meals. Otherwise the building is mostly closed to the public. We need to find a new cleaning company to cover in the interim. Scott Reed will check to find out who cleans Riggs Distler. If RFI will do it we should hire them.

Mr. Hammer questioned if there was some way to help with the cost of the Senior Meals. They already paid their April rent. Almira Aekus asked the Lions Club for help. Mr. Hammer questioned if we could reimburse their April rent.

A motion was made by Wayne Corse to waive the May rent for Senior Meals, seconded by Wayne Wood, all in favor.

Sewer Department

The Sewer Department staff will be staggering their hours, so they are not in the buildings at the same time.

Transfer Station

The Tuesday hours will be 11-6 beginning April 7th. Sunday stays at 12-4.

All employees/department heads will keep track of time paid/lost due to Corona concerns and of any additional expenses that might be incurred.

Attorneys were determined to be non-essential so Ms. Aekus will be cutting her office hours.

Other business / Office Administrator – as needed

Sewer Gig noted she hasn't heard back from anyone yet about the engineer's Preliminary Engineering Report and when to meet with them. Wayne Wood recommended not meeting with the engineers until May.

Mr. Edelstein volunteered to reach out to various companies that run sewage treatment plants to see if any would be interested in purchasing our plants.

Adjourn

A motion to adjourn was made by Wayne Wood, seconded by Scott Reed, all in favor.

Wayne Wood adjourned the meeting at 7:06pm.

Respectfully submitted,
~Gig Zboray