Clarke County

BROADBAND IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
TUESDAY, MAY 23, 2017

A meeting of the Broadband Implementation Committee was held at the Berryville/Clarke County Government Center, Berryville, Virginia, on Tuesday, May 23, 2017.

ATTENDANCE

Present: Robina Bouffault, Mary Daniel, Scott Kreider, Bev McKay

Absent: None

Staff Present: Brandon Stidham, Planning Director

CALLED TO ORDER

Mr. Stidham called the meeting to order at 2:10PM.

AGENDA

The Committee approved the agenda as presented by Staff.
Yes: Bouffault (moved), Daniel, Kreider (seconded), McKay
No: none
Absent: none

ORGANIZATIONAL ITEMS

Mr. Stidham provided an overview of the Committee's organizational items including the meeting schedule, whether the members wanted to elect a chair and vice-chair, and whether the Committee name is acceptable. The members agreed that a chair and vice-chair are not necessary and that they would operate as an informal workgroup. The members also had no problems with the Committee name. Mr. Stidham said that the Committee likely will need to meet more frequently early on and then either monthly or quarterly depending on the work plan. He added that they will revisit the schedule at the end of the meeting.

DISCUSSION, REQUEST FOR INFORMATION (RFI) – DRAFT SCOPE OF SERVICES

Mr. Stidham reviewed the draft scope of services for the Request for Information (RFI) that would be issued targeting telecommunications and broadband infrastructure and service providers. He said that this activity was recommended by the Atlantic Group in the Telecommunications Infrastructure and Broadband Study and that he worked with Mike Legge and used examples from other counties to develop the Scope of Services. He noted that the consultant had recommended issuing separate RFIs targeting service providers in one and infrastructure companies in the other but that Staff believed it could be handled in a single RFI document.

Mr. McKay made the point that we may want to identify structures in the County that can support antennas such as silos. Ms. Daniel noted that many residents may not want information on their structures publicized and that inviting a "self-reporting" of such structures may be a better approach. She added that the providers may be aware of these structures already. Mr. Stidham noted that companies searching for potential sites often use aerial photographs and GIS to identify tall structures for co-location.

Ms. Bouffault noted that on Page 3 of 21 in the document, the statement that "there are a number of areas where mobile telephone connectivity is limited and even unavailable" is not accurate and added that telecommunications providers cover most of the County. She also stated that she has an ongoing concern with the coverage map on Page 54 of the Telecommunications Study in that the representation of broadband coverage by existing towers is inaccurate. Mr. McKay noted that the problem with cellular based broadband is that it is expensive and has coverage limitations. Mr. Stidham said that there are areas of the County that have limited cellular telephone coverage and noted the northern portion of the County along the state line, along the Shenandoah River, and in some of the mountain areas. Mr. Kreider asked about the fiber optic cable that was recently installed along Route 7 from Leesburg. Mr. Stidham replied that this was a Federal government project and that the fiber optic cable is not for private access. Mr. Krieder said that he lives in Shenandoah Retreat which is served by Comcast. He added that Comcast internet access is reliable but very expensive and that there are no other provider options for many in the Retreat because of the tree coverage. Ms. Daniel stated that we have used the phrase, "reliable, cost-effective access to broadband," and that we need to work towards this as a goal with access to broadband speeds at the industry standards established by the Federal Communications Commission.

Ms. Bouffault noted that the ideal solution for broadband is wired, fiber-optic access. Mr. McKay said that the problem with the Shentel fiber in the County is that you cannot access it. Ms. Bouffault said that this is false – Shentel serves the Schools, Blandy Experimental Farm, and also to businesses. Mr. McKay said that the problem is that they do not serve residential customers. Mr. Stidham added that Shentel fiber provides one solution for business customers in certain areas of the County but right now is limited to that solution. Ms. Bouffault distributed a document showing the County's population density and noted that this is an obstacle to expansion of broadband. Mr. McKay said that this is why WISP service is so important. Ms. Bouffault replied that WISP providers will not construct new towers to serve an area with a low population density, and Mr. McKay responded that WISP providers can install their antennas on existing towers and tall structures like silos. Mr. McKay added that WISP technology can reach a wider number of customers because they can serve anyone within a 10 mile radius of the tower that has line of sight. Mr. Stidham noted that the radius of coverage for cellular service is far less than that of WISP service. Ms. Bouffault noted that there are only 350 residents on the mountain between Route 7 and Route 50 and that the broadband providers are not going to invest in towers to serve this limited number of customers, many of whom are already being served by other providers. She added that what we may see are modifications to extend the heights of existing towers in the County to bring them above the tree line. She also said that co-location projects may come out of the RFI process.

Mr. Stidham said that the RFI process is designed to cast a wide net to all areas of the telecommunications industry which may produce several innovative approaches to serve the County.

He described a recent article in the Fauquier County newspaper regarding a new technology that uses "data pipeline units" or "wands" located along fiber optic lines to transmit broadband access. Mr. McKay said there is a company that embeds fiber optic cable in the asphalt on roads as a new method for providing wired broadband. Regarding the RFI process, Mr. McKay said we need to figure out a way to ensure that tower developers do not make it cost-prohibitive for WISP providers to co-locate their antennas. Ms. Daniel replied that she did not think there was anything we could do about that issue. Ms. Bouffault said that in talking with tower developers, they will not move forward on a new tower application unless they have commitments from at least two providers to locate on the tower. Mr. Stidham added that the WISP providers can locate their antennas in between the cellular providers' arrays and that tower developers will want to sell as much space as possible on their towers.

Ms. Bouffault distributed and reviewed a document that she compiled showing broadband providers that serve Clarke County. She asked whether all providers will be notified of the RFI and Mr. Stidham replied yes. She then cautioned that it is unlikely that the respondents will be forthcoming with information if you get them together for a meeting since they are all in competition with one another. Ms. Daniel noted that you could meet with them one at a time. Mr. Stidham said that it will depend on the nature of the responses received. He said that if you get a broad range of responses from different providers, then face to face meetings may be appropriate. If you get similar responses from one industry sector, then you may want to have a group meeting with that sector.

Ms. Bouffault recommended de-emphasizing the importance of the Telecommunications Study and the tower location map in the RFI process because of her concerns with its accuracy. She said that in addition to her comments on Page 3 of 21, she does not think that obtaining input on the Study should be the first bullet item on Page 4 of 21. Mr. Stidham said that he intentionally put that item at the top of the list so that respondents can provide their feedback on the accuracy of the Study. He added that if the industry is skeptical of the Study's recommendations, we need to know this as well as why they have concerns with it. Mr. McKay said he would not be the least bit offended if industry representatives think the Study has errors and would like to share their opinions. Mr. Kreider reiterated the concern that the County's low population density is going to discourage broadband infrastructure investment. Ms. Bouffault noted that broadband availability for businesses needs to be promoted through the economic development office. Mr. Kreider asked whether Shentel would allow someone to buy business-class broadband and re-sell it to an area. Mr. Stidham said that this is probably a Federal licensing issue. Ms. Bouffault noted that companies that are expanding infrastructure like Shentel can provide additional service in the County if we tell them what we want.

Ms. Daniel said that the plan is to make sure the RFI is distributed widely to industry representatives and she noted that she could not find the list of service providers on the County website. Mr. Stidham said that he believed the page was taken down in order to move it to a ".org" webpage. He added that he recommended to Gordon Russell that the domain name "clarkeconnect.org" could be claimed for this webpage. Regarding next steps on the RFI, he can ask Mike Legge to put the revised scope of services into a procurement format and he will also ask the County Administrator whether the Board of Supervisors will have to formally vote to release the RFI or whether it can be authorized by the Committee. Mr. Stidham asked whether the Committee would like to be the entity that meets with the respondents and the members agreed unanimously. He also added that in reviewing RFIs

from other counties, he noted that they often have public infrastructure such as fire stations and government properties in their rural areas where broadband infrastructure could be located. He said that our County lacks these assets in significant numbers other than water towers which could be a detriment.

Ms. Bouffault brought up the issue of the School Board's efforts to provide broadband to students. She said that Dr. Bishop is looking into an educational "hotspot" called Kajeet which provides filtered cellular broadband access at a reduced cost for student use. She noted funds have been donated through the education foundation for projects like this but that more funding is needed. She asked whether the Board would earmark $100,000 per year for school educational broadband purposes that would be provided by the County for use by the Schools. Mr. McKay and Ms. Daniel replied that this kind of request would come via the Schools' annual budget request similar to the construction fund. Ms. Bouffault said she wanted to make sure the funds were earmarked for this purpose and that they would not get diverted. Ms. Daniel noted that the Handley library administration wanted to do the same thing but ran into technical difficulties when they tried it in Clarke County. Ms. Bouffault then provided details on the Kajeet system and its cost. She added that the Schools are going to do a parent survey to gauge need and interest. She reiterated that funding could be earmarked and held by the County for this purpose. Mr. Stidham said that the County could hold the money in a designated fund and that the Schools could request access to the funding on an annual basis for specific projects. Mr. McKay said that this would have to be addressed during the annual budget cycle and that it should not be requested outside of the cycle. Mr. Stidham added that there is plenty of time to work on developing this project for the next budget cycle starting in the fall. Ms. Bouffault said that this would be a very visible way for the County to demonstrate a commitment to improving broadband access. Mr. Stidham asked whether it would be appropriate to invite Dr. Bishop to a future meeting. Mr. McKay said that we should focus on improving broadband access for all residents which would address student access at the same time. Ms. Bouffault said that by waiting for the next budget cycle, you would be missing an entire school year where the service is needed.

Mr. Kreider returned to a discussion of the RFI and asked for confirmation that we will be moving forward on it and Mr. Stidham said yes. Ms. Bouffault asked whether the Committee has a budget and if there is no money available, what projects would the Committee be working on. Mr. Stidham replied that the Committee needs to determine their projects first and then decide if any of them require funding. Mr. McKay agreed that it is too early to determine whether the Committee needs funding. Mr. Stidham then reviewed a list of potential committee activities on Page 8 of 21. Ms. Daniel noted that the first bullet should include a process for County projects and placement of broadband infrastructure on County properties and buildings. Mr. Stidham asked the members if they wanted Len Capelli to attend these meetings for economic development, and Ms. Daniel suggested having him attend for the RFI response review. She also recommended on Page 3 of 21, third paragraph third line, removing "a number of" instead of substituting the word "small." On the same page, second paragraph ninth line, Mr. McKay suggested adding "affordable and" before "cost-effective." Regarding the list of proposed committee activities, Mr. McKay and Ms. Bouffault both noted that the telecommunications and broadband industry seems to be expanding and evolving faster in recent months than it has in the past. Ms. Daniel noted that the proposed work item to meet with

industry representatives to discuss expansion and partnership opportunities would probably be an ongoing task as new technologies reach the market.

Ms. Bouffault suggested that the Committee organize a general mailing to the citizens on County broadband access alternatives which could use the same information that will be on the webpage. She added that it is relatively inexpensive to do a mass mailing but recommended against including it with the tax bills. Mr. Stidham said that the Committee should discuss the content of a mass mailing at the next meeting. He added that he will get with Mike Legge to identify a timeline for the RFI process and will report back at the next meeting. Mr. McKay suggested inviting Mr. Capelli to the next meeting as he has contacts for potential grant opportunities. The members agreed to hold the next meeting on Tuesday, June 13 at 2:00PM.

On a motion by Mr. Kreider, seconded by Ms. Bouffault, the meeting was adjourned at 3:32PM.

Brandon Stidham, Planning Director