

Northport Broadband Internet Committee
Meeting minutes -- January 11, 2022

Present (in person and via Zoom): Ann Frenning Kossuth, Karl Beiser, Bill Frysinger, Julian Sheffield, James Kossuth, Absent: Brady Brim-DeForest.

Guests Kerem Durdag , Sean Byrne, and Derek Gagnon of GWI; Mark Ouellette of Axiom; and Dan Webster.

The meeting was called to order at 5pm. Review of minutes from the Dec 16 meeting was postponed until a future meeting in the interest of time.

The meeting consisted of a wide ranging discussion of whether and in what ways Northport could work with GWI to bring broadband connectivity to every residence and business in Northport, building on the project already in progress that will serve roughly half of the town.

GWI staff stated that the company is very interested and excited to work on providing such connectivity.

The \$1.5 to \$1.9 million estimated cost in the Axiom report is judged to be in the right ball park.

Whether the current infrastructure grant opportunity is worth pursuing will depend in large part on whether the amount available is the roughly \$6.5 million projected last year, or whether a recent indication that the newly formed Maine Connectivity Authority will follow through on a recent discussion of adding \$10 million it has at its disposal to the ConnectMaine program. This will be decided at the body's Jan 12 board meeting. The lower figure would result in extraordinary competition for the limited funds and reduce the likelihood of obtaining funding.

This ConnectMaine funding round will be very different from those in the past. Application rules have changed in myriad ways, some of which are not yet clear, though they may be clarified at a Jan 19 workshop for applicants. An online Sales-Force-based platform will be used in lieu of a paper application form.

Eligibility criteria have changed, again in a manner that is not fully clear. There may be no more than 75 households in Northport that are unambiguously at the highest level of eligibility. More info is needed. Considerable weight in evaluation of grants is placed on the amount of local funding committed to a project. Local buy-in is crucial.

GWI staff stated that the company is willing to commit funds to the undertaking in a manner similar to what it did in the previously funded ConnectMaine round.

Maps indicating unserved and underserved areas have been developed by ConnectMaine and will guide in evaluation of applications. There appears to be no option to challenge any errors in those maps.

Assuming the level of funding ends up in the \$16 million area, GWI would plan to target mid February for completion of an application.

A local commitment of funds must be officially made prior to submission of the grant application. This would necessitate Select Board action asap, probably at the Jan 24 meeting, and a subsequent special town meeting in February in order to officially commit funds.

While there are uncertainties about the current ConnectMaine funding round, there are even more with respect to the federal American Recover Plan money (roughly \$130 million for Maine) and the Build Back Better federal infrastructure money. Rules for eligibility, cash or in-kind match, reporting requirements, and a myriad of potentially daunting bureaucratic requirements are still being settled. There is some talk of a required 25% local cash match. There is very little clear right now about this large amount of funds and when or if they might be relevant to Northport. Best strategy is to be ready as one can be, and to seek funding incrementally if no single option for funding coverage of the remainder of the town emerges.

Advanced notice of 10 to 14 days is needed to set a special town meeting in Northport.

With respect to the current build, GWI is still doing pole prep work for Phase 2 and Phase 3.

Other matters: Karl will draft a write-up for the report on Northport's use of the \$2500 in ConnectMaine planning grant money. This is due at the end of January.

Meeting adjourned at 6:20pm.