

TRI TOWN MEETING – October 5, 2020

Present: Margo Connors, Richard Bielefield, John Strasser, Jennifer Gaudette, Kim Cowles, Jill Brewer, Jeffrey Blodgett, Eric Meth, Zak Mei, Bob Thibault, Toni Woodruff

Guests: Representative Tim Egan, Barbara Fischer, Peter Grote via zoom: Martha MacLeod

Purpose of the meeting was to discuss Tri-Town collaboration on obtaining better internet service for all residents.

Margo Connors attended a workshop presented by North Country Council and will send to other boards the overview of the workshop that included basic technology and different options available. Carole Monroe, Board Chair of Valley Net that serves both NH and Vermont and discussion on rural towns pulling together to form a non-profit to deal with the many providers. Margo shared a spreadsheet developed by Steve Naboicheck, a Sugar Hill resident, on the different types of broadband technology in the area to use as a reference for discussion.

Eric Meth discussed NH Business Review and SB 170 to encourage municipal bonding of towns and companies. Franconia met with Consolidated about a joint venture since NH is encouraging this type of private/public collaboration. As most were aware Mt Top Telecom did not get the CARES ACT grant and perhaps because it was a wireless grant and fiber optic. One of the successful grantees was Bristol and Eric has contact information if the group would like to hear from someone. It is a long road and dedicated residents make it happen. Perhaps the towns need to form a committee and get residents on said committee.

Representative Tim Egan discussed the need for better broadband for among many things, remote learning, public safety and economic development. The State Senate passed a bill that allows single towns to band together and form a communication district. There are three different funding partners in the pipeline to include: Northern Borders Regional Commission, O Rural Digital Op Fund, NH Farm Bureau and any leftover CARES-OIC funds for broadband. Erin Hennessey, Elaine French and Tim all supported this bill. Tim felt that the Mt. Top Telecom approach being all wireless may have been the reason it was not selected as all the funding went to existing hardwire proposals that have to be implemented by December 1st. For the towns to move forward, step #1 would be for the towns to create warrant articles to create funds toward a community owned non-profit. Step #2 would be to contact Harold Parker, Chair of Northern Borders to see about matching grant funds. Tim has spoken with representatives of both Comcast and Spectrum and they would have interest in becoming a partner and help us access the RDOF funds. They would review at what is required under 911 service and where there is no service currently and figure out cost access, validity to build out and improve infrastructure. Contacts include Chris Hodgdon – Comcast and Melinda Kenney for Spectrum. Concern that Consolidated has the funds to invest in infrastructure but should be include in pool to look at. Also, NH ELECTRIC COOP is looking to be in the game as well.

Tim noted that the group could expand to defray the cost and include more than just the tri towns and that Bethlehem and Lisbon have expressed interest. Eric felt that the more towns in the

communication district could build a rural regional system that spreads out the population to drive the cost down. More towns involved is good for grants and says to the cable company to create an initiative. Possibly include Bath and Lyman as there is better chance with more support. Zak asked a what point is too large? It was agreed that Bethlehem, Franconia, Easton, Sugar Hill, Lisbon and Lyman would be a good starting point with a representative from each town.

Eric asked if the group would be interested in hearing from Nick Coates of Bristol for a possible presentation.

Is there a definition of underserved? Is the goal to bring a minimum or to improve existing? Tim said the goal should be to provide minimum and devise a build out. Two packages that serve all. Let the cable companies say and we can't have something unaffordable and it needs to be done efficiently. There is federal and grant money out there and Northern Borders and RDOF want to help.

The next step is for each town to decide if they want to do a warrant article contribution and have conversations with other towns followed by meeting with Comcast and Spectrum representatives. The group would need to contact representative of Senator Shaheen, Rep Kuster on how best to get Federal Funding. First step is to get E-911 lists and tax maps out to Tim Egan to share with possible partners including Spectrum and Comcast. Margo will contact Bethlehem and Lisbon to gauge interest.

The boards agreed to meet again in a couple of weeks.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Gaudette
Administrative Assistant