



## Fiber Broadband Completion Task Force Meeting February 17, 2022

The meeting was called to order at 6:32.  
The meeting was held virtually via Zoom.  
Members Mark Howell, Gordon Brockway and Gail Hire were present. Scott Hopkinson and David Hesel were not available. Gail Hire volunteered to be clerk. Concord Select Board liaison Terri Ackerman and Concord Chief Information Officer/Interim Director of Telecommunications Jason Bulger attended.

The minutes from February 10 are the only still pending minutes.

Chair's report:

Future meetings will be scheduled for 2/24, 3/3, 3/10, 3/24 all at 6:30 PM.

Finance Committee will hold its Enterprise Budgets Hearing on March 17 at 7 pm. The Light Plant will need to attend.

Our Task Force may want to prepare something to present at this hearing.

Mark Howell attended the Chair's breakfast, where it was discussed that the Massachusetts Legislature is expected to extend the emergency authorization, which allows Zoom meetings as opposed to in person meeting, until July 15. We will have the option to meet in person or have a public hearing in person. Gordon Brockway suggested it would

help to have a screen showing the remote participants that we could all see.

### Broadband Staffing Changes

Director of Telecommunications Greg Marcinek has left as of Friday, Feb 11. Jason Bulger is assuming Broadband-related duties.

Mr. Bulger asked what we were seeking from staff. Mr. Howell forwarded the Task Force's data request and the correspondence with roads program. At one point there was going to be follow up on installations and backlog. Mr. Howell suggests bringing that back to next Light Board meeting.

Mr. Howell noted that with respect to ARPA funding, one determinant of which projects will get funded will be revenues lost during the pandemic. With respect to Broadband revenues, it is easy to make case that installs were interrupted and therefore the Town lost revenue that would have occurred if not for pandemic. The Select Board showed a small shift in direction about disbursement at its last meeting, so there could be value in making that case.

Mr. Brockway asked if the Select Board was less interested in spending ARPA funding on Broadband.

Mr. Howell responded that the Select Board looked at many different proposals on Jan 31 (about 1 hour into meeting for about 20 min) but then went into a discussion. The Town

could declare all of the 5.6 million as falling under 10M cap for lost revenue and cycle these funds through the normal budgetary process. Still an open discussion.

Ms. Hire suggested that there may be funding for climate resilience that could be used for undergrounding power lines.

Mr. Brockway has asked to speed up the power line undergrounding project. Any stretched out project gets more expensive; if done quickly it lowers the overall cost.

Ms. Hire noted that the Town could put fiber underground as well.

Mr. Howell said both thoughts can go into our report. We can illuminate the circumstances and suggest a programmatic response. This will help Boards like Light Board and budgeting authorities consider options. If we really looked at the Town's Undergrounding program, it does not intend to underground entire system.

Undergrounding in rural areas is not done in same way as urban/suburban. There are different approaches and maintenance costs vary. There is a cost benefit to that.

Mr. Brockway asked a related question about prioritizing.

Mr. Howell said that the central point of electric distribution should be underground, and the nodes. Bridges and railroad crossings are places where undergrounded utility has to go overhead for practical reasons.

Mr. Howell expanded on ARPA fund uses. Buy the Concord Light Broadband department the equipment that offers the capability to underground in more rural areas. Directional

boring or “Ditch Witch” are higher speed/ lower cost ways to underground fiber lines. These options would lead to lower cost deployment and more coverage. ARPA could be used to buy the equipment and train people to use.

Mr. Bulger is in the Telecommunications Director position on an interim basis. He wants to support our [Task Force’s] goal. Data would be useful and should be readily available. He wants to be more engaged and transparent with Broadband operations. It is good at regular interval to check that short and long term goals match what residents want. He invited people to email him.

Mr. Brockway thanked Mr. Bulger, saying that the Town ought to be a great place to work. Wants to make his job easier. This Task Force will be a good platform if Mr. Bulger sees obstacles.

Mr. Bulger said it would be great to have a place to post the information. It may help figure out barriers to subscription. Mr. Howell recalled that Jill Moonheron provided the Task Force with spreadsheets and map of availability. It would help the Telecom Department if these investigations could feed into the GIS. NISC (utility system for electric) may have some GIS data with links to customer billing accounts. We were looking at Base Layer info with Fiber overlay. Mr. Howell suggests annotating the data with “no fiber because\_\_” (fill in the blank). Hopefully the Roads, Engineering and Telecom departments all have access to and use these data for planning. Will help provide answers to residents, who deserve a response to question of when

they might get Broadband. Waiting for repairs to a failed underground electric system could be very long time.

Mr. Howell has had no direct responses to setting up something with Roads. Ask was when can we have a discussion about how the planning is done.

Mr. Brockway did a back-of-the-envelope calculation. The data showed Concord has 115 miles of roads and 100 have fiber, but nothing about how badly roads need to be paved or whether fiber or electric are underground. Electric undergrounding is \$1M/mile and it takes a fair # years to get to \$1M. If we split these two undergrounding projects, maybe we can afford \$80K per mile which is cost of fiber undergrounding. Can do this analysis at a town level without even looking at missing streets.

Mr. Howell wanted to clarify with respect to Alford and Stacey Circles, there already is undergrounded electric. Have these Circles just missed the boat for fiber? Or is there a lane - when road is repaved? His understanding that on most recent projects (Lexington Road and Concord Tpk) no issue with dealing with fiber at same time. Concerns are where there is no electric project on the horizon. Under what conditions might fiber get done? Mr. Brockway back of envelope -  $80K * 15 \text{ miles} = \$1.2M$ . Who has budget for this?

Mr. Howell noted the budget review showed there is \$300K

for fiber capital improvements. Probably 10 year program if you combine with other construction. Creative thinking re solutions is called for. More expensive to install in denser urban areas.

Example, Virginia Road - most have underground electric but no fiber; more space and easier to install. We should suggest "here are the areas". Group 2 on VA Road is 6576 feet or 1.2 miles.

Ms. Hire asked if fiber must go in same path. Can fiber go down side of road or in a shallower trench?

Mr. Howell suggested we should find out. Could get a lot done with a focused program here.

Evolution of roads - Public Works program is looking at a variety of different treatments. Full-depth reconstruction, crack sealing and nothing in between. This is analogous from fiber perspective. Can get fiber done when working on street for other reason. Need further discussion with Town Staff about possibilities and writing up the options.

#### ARPA/Infrastructure

Mr. Howell noted that in addition to the idea of whether there should be consideration to lost revenue, a second idea (consistent with suggestions from the Select Board meeting) is some type of affordable Broadband service. The Town doesn't offer Internet Essentials like the investor-owned utilities do. It would not be that helpful if

people who qualify can't get the service because there is no fiber to provide the service. We could create funding to enable IE-qualified customers to get access by applying. Need a mechanism to enable low income customers. The Broadband enterprise could budget to pay into such a fund instead of subsidizing the PILOF.

Another use of ARPA funds could be capital equipment that could enable lower-cost undergrounding. Undergrounding is the main inhibitor to not having fiber.

GB: Karlen and he emailed about eligibility for low income Karlen Reed, 83 Whit's End, asked Carole Hilton (Light Plant customer service chief) how many are residents participate in the electric rate residential assistance program? Answer = 176. How many of those participate in Broadband? Answer = 1. Rationale? She didn't know why so few income-qualified residents have Broadband.

Vince Carlson. new version of subsidy. Emergency Broadband Benefit now called Affordable Connectivity Program. Provides \$30/month discount on current bill for internet service and cable for anyone who applies. \$30/month X 600 ppl eligible in Concord. Income level to qualify is twice the poverty level, or \$50,000 family income. Concord Light Broadband could get quite a bit per month paid by Government for that service. This does not pay the marginal cost to provide service, but does help with low cost service.

Mr. Howell said if the Town can make the capital expenditure to serve premises, then Fed Funding for ongoing service would allow the Town to at least break even.

Mr. Carlson noted that Concord Light Broadband would need to apply to participate. Still open. Some munis in MA do participate. Subsidy is slated to go on indefinitely.

Mr. Howell stated that ARPA funding would be nice as an accelerator. We've identified a particular population that is not served, and it would be appropriate to plan a solution for breaking even over time. This policy would support other goals of helping those in need, disadvantaged.

Ms. Hire asked if these folks would want Broadband if it were offered.

Mr. Carlson observed it is hard for people to give up one service and start another.

Mr. Howell suggested that Fiber connectivity should go along with development of affordable housing units, so it is already present when property changes hands. In addition, when you are talking about families, fiber can provides connectivity directly with school. Fiber is not just internet service; it supports public safety, and provides virtually unlimited bandwidth, virtual learning. The fiber network can become more sustainable if town housing is automatically wired.



Mr. Carlson noted that Longmont, Colorado, provides free internet in certain sectors. Any public housing has free internet, as do nursing homes and senior categories. There are silos of ARPA money for certain use cases, including STEM education and STEM infrastructure. Potential opportunity for middle school budget, and senior categories like telehealth.

Mr. Howell said the last category where ARPA can support fiber construction is to propose low- or no- interest construction loans. In situations where there is a significant investment for condo or apt - create loan to pay for it or recover thru future customer revenue. One way to do this is to look at turnover. We have 7 to 8 years of Broadband customers' data. Perception is that turnover is low. This informs a payback analysis.

FCC rulemaking - updating rules to increase Broadband competition in apartment buildings, Multi tenant Environments. FCC Docket 22-12.

Ms. Hire asked how does this order get implemented. Concord Commons 94 Conant Street converted from a light industrial building. Mr. Howell (Telecom Director at the time) made a call to someone involved in project to see if they would like fiber; was informed there was an arrangement with cable company. In exchange for wiring building they'd have exclusive marketing rights. One way or other

Concord Light Broadband needs framework for getting to those customers.

Mr. Brockway noted the upcoming zoning changes allowing affordable housing by right would affect areas around train depots. Within 50 acres builders can go high and dense and Town would not be able to influence structure design. This is an opportunity for the Town to impose requirement for fiber service.

Mr. Howell believes consumers have better service when they have competitive choices.

Suggestions for next steps and next meeting:

- keep on pushing data requests.
- work backwards and think about recommendations and how to build out.

Mr. Howell noted topics like marketing more directly are straightforward; what is the right amount of capital to support on ongoing basis. What type of goals should they have? For example, put fiber underground, add new installs, marketing - with key performance indicators.

Mr. Brockway said we are pushing back on early return of capital because the fiber network is not yet completed. The temptation to turn the Broadband enterprise into a dividend-creating thing should be resisted before the work is done.

Mr. Howell agrees. Also, how to support Diversity Equity Inclusion? Target this at the Select Board and FinCom policy making. Also include sustainability, so they know about the synergies with pushing the fiber network. “Envision Concord” highly-connected community, such as micro grids in future. These are long range plans.

#### Public Comments.

Karlen Reed asked whether the Telecom Director position will be advertised soon? Mr. Bulger will brief the Light Board on this at its next meeting.

Terri Ackerman: was excited to see Jason here, will be a big help. She likes a lot of what she heard about going across silos. ARPA is only 5M but is unique opportunity. ARPA also allows the Town to apply for specific projects. The Infrastructure bill will provide more \$. She agreed with Vince Carlson’s comments that the biggest obstacle for herself and neighbors was the incredible complexity of moving from Comcast. The Task Force should do whatever we can do to help with that, explaining how to make that move, educating people. She asked whether our Report - would recommend how to fund?

Mr. Howell said it is important for us to put forward options for funding. For example fiber construction funding, to be incorporated in the Roads program, will need to be replenished through Broadband revenue. How. road repair revolving fund is cumbersome for town meeting.

Director suggested to fund out of depreciation. This question is wrapped up in visibility and where are goals set. We should take a stab at (1) identifying opportunities and (2) put finger on scale and suggest which option could be most effective. Up to the financial-policy setting boards to make the decision.

Terri Ackerman - issues include operating versus capital, enterprise issues, equity - current customers have paid for installation but under DEI-type policy or ARPA, we would subsidize, which would benefit new customers but not existing ones - it is a big question.

Mark Howell useful where possible to draw parallels. Overlay accounts where seniors have discount on tax assessment. In reality all others take up the slack for those seniors who qualify; this is considered acceptable. We can point a way through and the policy-making bodies get to decide.

Vince Carlson - sent Mark Howell an email update on automated keeping of minutes. Zoom always had a transcript feature with low level; Otter.ai speech to text is now 95%. He sent a proposal to review. One difference - transcript you can get is 70-80 pages. Youtube also creates automatic chapters, is searchable.

Gordon Brockway moved to adjourn. Gail Hire seconded. Roll call vote of Mr. Brockway and Ms. Hire and Mr. Howell

each voted Aye. Adjourned 8:04.