

Gogebic Range Broadband Committee
February 24 2021 meeting notes

Norman McKindles opened the online Zoom meeting at 12:02 pm.

Participants: Norm McKindles (primary/secondary education), Kelly Kline (Iron Co. Economic Development), Brandon Yuchasz (Gogebic Range.net), Joe Bonovetz (Gogebic County), Glen Ackerman-Behr (Gogebic Community College), Jerry Wuorenmaa (WUPPDR), Thomas Stephenson (Connect MI), Maria Graser (Treasurer Ironwood Township), Crystal Rohde (NWRP), Haley Tollefson and Corey Hauer (LTD Broadband), Remy Fortin (Rep. Bergman's office), Bob Lepper (Springstead Township), Mike Shouldice (Mercer resident), Dean Gustafson (Mercer resident), Dan Hance, John Oliver, Bob McGuffin, Greg Clark (Watersmeet residents), and Opal Roberts (Iron County Supervisor).

Tower Updates: Brandon reported the progress is about the same as last month on all the projects as they are waiting for the weather to break in order to resume work. He is working on a project in Gogebic County targeting the Little Girls Point area.

Regional Planning Commission Survey: Crystal explained that they are in the data tabulation phase of the four-county survey sent out last Fall. Iron County had 885 residential and 40 business surveys returned (both online and hard copy). 16% on residential and 11% on business side. About 535 were hard copy. Several staff members are working on the tabulation. Work on the report will continue this summer and data will be shared as it becomes available.

Community Education Subcommittee: The committee has not met. Have had some conversation with schools and should be able to move forward with that. There is an opportunity for collaboration between GGC and MI Tech University called Tomorrow's Talent Series. If any professionals on the call would like to video a day in the life of their profession and submit it, the video will then be condensed to about three minutes and placed on a website. Career exploration teachers, starting with grades 7 through high school, can use the videos to talk about opportunities in their region. This is available to both WI and MI. If interested reach out to Glen and he will get it set up.

Mike Shouldice asked if Glen is involving libraries in the subcommittee. Glen said he hasn't reached out to them but he will. Glen has already been in contact with Wendy Thiede for FE University.

Norm said there was a Federal grant to supply hot spots for students who had a difficult time connecting through their usual internet provider. Mercer school had applied for it but he did not see them on the list of awards.

Business Center/Shared Workspace: Kelly has continued to have conversations with the Mercer library director and others but had nothing new to report. This is important for our remote workers but also those who are on work-cation. Norm asked if this is a new word. As Glen is monitoring the workforce trends in the area the number of requirements is growing rapidly as far as job postings in our area.

FCC Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF): Tom Stephenson (Connected Nation) explained they have been working with providers all over MI and also in TX. He had been working with Corey and Haley in TX on the RDOF funding and invited them to start the conversation with this committee. He introduced Corey and Haley to talk about their build-out and what their plans are. They will be working with Crystal, Kelly, and others here on the WI side.

Corey: we are really excited about being able to build-out infrastructure in this area. There is quite a bit of pent-up demand and a number of queries on their website. Looking at each of these jurisdictions individually and talking to stakeholders and existing middle mile providers. In contact with people across the state line with AEG on their build and how to collaborate with them. Obviously, there are a number of good transport providers and ISP's they are hoping to work with as they execute the RDOF build.

Norm stated that in one of the announcements about the awards for these new builds there was some discussion about communities having to be prepared and ready for the upcoming opportunities. What does that mean exactly in terms of what will be required of them to be ready?

Corey stated they have an aggressive timetable to complete these goals. They hope to be 20% complete within the first two years. 40% complete within the first three years. To that extent if there are electric co-ops, for profits, or power utilities that have aerial poles that might be suitable for joint use agreements and pole attachments. Local jurisdictions could help with permitting and right of way issues. To the extent that communities can help by being aligned with enabling gigabit service into these communities.

Norm asked what kind of delivery system they will be using. Corey replied they will be using buried and aerial fiber. Norm asked if they are looking at the very rural and sparsely populated areas. Corey answered the RDOF area posted to the map showing all the census areas and the awardees are blue on that map and that is the area they will be serving. Each census shape file shows the number of homes the FCC believes are in that area. Those are the homes they are obligated to serve but they might serve other areas with their own money.

They will definitely be working and partnering with local providers already in the area. Those providers could also tap into the resources they are providing for additional capacity and redundancy.

When starting the permitting process local officials need to know what this is all about and to how to cooperate as much as possible. Kelly asked if it would make sense to start providing officials with information soon and making them aware that this is coming up. Tom agreed and said they need to know who LTD Broadband is why they are wanting to dig up their dirt and what the benefits the project will have to the community. These work-cations may be permanent and we might see full time residents where before we saw vacation only residents. Broadband availability is a key part of that. Haley has a video that she can send a link to explaining what they are looking for. The FCC had not been very forthcoming on their timelines. They have 417 awardees in RDOF and the process only closed a few days ago. It may be three months to a year to start dispersing funds. LTD is hoping that, since they are one of the larger winners, their application may be toward the top of the stack. The FCC will be making a very public announcement about the grant awards which will make available gigabit broadband for millions of rural homes which would probably never have received it. The FCC knows this is a hot button issue for America and they are proud of what they accomplished so will be shouting it from the rooftops and not sitting on this money.

The NWRP survey data does not affect the project. Tom said their obligation is to build it and they are estimating that a lot of people are going to take the service. These areas may not have ever seen this type of gigabit service without this program. They are looking at a forty- or fifty-year investment in fiber, with the gigabit fiber that is going into the ground now providing 10 gigabit and eventually 100 gigabit service in the future, all on the same fiber. The cost range will be about \$100 for very fast service. Through fiber, the rural areas will see much faster speeds than cities served by cable companies. That could be a draw to our area.

AEG & Heron Broadband will be providing something similar on the MI side. The problem now is labor and materials. The Department of Labor is putting together a package of training dollars on the order of an apprenticeship program. This is being worked on the MI side and WI might get something going too. GCC would be a good source for this program. Kline explained that WI does have a training program currently which could be used for this purpose.

Kline was at a meeting where it was predicted that 30% of remote workers will stay remote.

Norm thanked Glen for hosting the meeting and to Amy for taking last meeting notes.

Next meeting will be March 31st at noon.

Meeting adjourned at 12:50 pm.

Submitted by Opal Roberts