

Gogebic Range Broadband Committee
June 30 2021 meeting notes

Norman McKindles opened the in person in the Iron County Boardroom and online meeting at 10:00 am.

Participants: Norm McKindles (primary/secondary education), Kelly Klein (Iron Co. Economic Development), Joe Bonovetz (Gogebic County), Glen Ackerman-Behr (Gogebic Community College), Mitchel Olson (Bug Tussel Wireless), Thomas Stephenson (Connect MI), Bruce Moore (Highline Internet), Richard Thiede (Oma resident), Dean Gustafson (Mercer resident), Mike Shouldice (Mercer resident), Yvonne Clark (Watersmeet Trustee), John Oliver (Watersmeet), Dan Hance (Watersmeet Township Internet Task force), Austin & Kathy Clark (Springstead residents), Amy Nosal (WI-Extension), Danny Gardner (Iron County IT), and Opal Roberts (Iron County Supervisor).

Tower Updates: The Fisher Lake Tower is still not completed. Brandon hasn't been able to hire a climber to complete the top of the tower.

The placement of an LTE upgrade of equipment on the Popko Circle tower will provide service to the Lake of the Falls area.

Remote Worker Get-Together: Amy reported on the Iron County online meeting of remote workers. A diverse group of people discussed the realm of remote work and what they need to integrate into our community. Workspaces were discussed and there was interest in having sites available. Since the people were not in a centralized location several sites would be needed.

Business Center/Shared Workspace: Glen explained the GGC doors are open and the shared workspace is available. There will be a person onsite until 9:00 pm. No charges for non-profits. The form for reserving space is available online. There is a workspace available in Manitowish Waters. Glen suggested that a location in downtown Ironwood would be a more accessible site for the workspace. Amy stated that workspace sites may be hard to maintain and be financially sustainable.

Bug Tussel Project: Mitch Olson gave a presentation on the broadband project "Road to Digital Equality" currently planned buy his company. He explained the "first mile" of fiber is from major cities to other major cities. The "middle mile", which is the current project of Bug Tussel, will run through rural areas to connect the towers and make them more reliable. The "last mile" will be to connect individual homes to the fiber network.

The financing of the plan is rather unique. Some will be funded by grants, the remainder through conduit bonding. Bug Tussel proposed a plan to use a bond backed by \$6,421,200 of Iron County funds to finance the installation of middle mile fiber in the county. This will attract companies to provide fiber to the houses since the fiber will already be available. The county would not have to contribute any monies and will be paid at the rate of 3.35% for the use of Iron County's credit over the course of the next 30 years. The major question was what happens if Bug Tussel goes bankrupt during this time period. The bonds will be secured by all the assets of Bug Tussel, then by all Bug Tussel assets in Iron County. Only if those two fail would Iron County be responsible for any remaining debt. This proposal is for Fond du Lac County to be the issuing county. Bug Tussel has this question before other county boards in the state to approve or deny.

McKindles commented that all this grant money is not being spent wisely. All these grant programs are causing duplication of construction and laying of fiber by different companies. This entire broadband project should be better regulated to get more efficient service for less taxpayer money.

The recommendation was for the Bug Tussel bonding proposal be presented to the Iron County Finance Committee.

Bruce Moore reported that his company, Highline Internet (Atlantic Engineering Group), has received \$190 million in RDOF grants for the UP of Michigan. \$7.8 million will be spent in Gogebic County. Their strategy is to provide as much fiber to the home as possible.

In reply to a question about the Iron County towers Mitch said all towers would be in operation some time during September. Bug Tussel plans to have the "middle mile" project done within three years.

Thiede made the comment that Gogebic Range.net has been an active partner and would not like to see him put out of business by this process.

Kline made the comment that rural areas will have to have fiber available or we will be left behind the rest of the country.

Next meeting will be **Thursday**, July 29th at 10:00 am in person in the Iron County boardroom and virtually through Zoom.

Meeting adjourned at 11:08 am.

Submitted by Opal Roberts