CHAMPAIGN COUNTY BOARD
BROADBAND TASK FORCE AGENDA
County of Champaign, Urbana, Illinois
Tuesday, April 26, 2022 - 4:30 p.m.

Shields-Carter Meeting Room
Brookens Administrative Center
1776 E. Washington St., Urbana

MINUTES – Approved as Distributed July 11, 2022

Members Present:	Stephanie Burnett, Samantha Carter, Brad Passalacqua, Mike Smeltzer, Eric Thorsland, and Brad Uken
Members Absent:	M.C. Neal, Kyle Patterson, and Jacob Paul,
Others Present:	Darlene Kloeppel (County Executive), Mary Ellen Wuellner (Grant Writer), and Mary Ward (Recording Secretary)

Agenda Items

I. Call to Order

Mr. Uken called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m.

II. Roll Call

Roll call was taken, and a quorum was declared present.

III. Approval of Agenda/Addendum

MOTION by Ms. Carter to approve the agenda; seconded by Mr. Passalacqua. Upon voice vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

IV. Approval of Minutes
A. April 5, 2022
B. April 18, 2022

MOTION by Mr. Thorsland to approve the minutes of the April 5 and April 18, 2022 meetings, seconded by Ms. Carter. Upon voice vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

V. Public Participation

Jason Young, Volo Internet and Tech, spoke on the importance of the project focusing on fiber infrastructure in lieu of wireless for long-term sustainability.

VI. Communications

There were no communications.

VII. New Business
A. Strategic Considerations for Bringing Broadband to Underserved Areas of Champaign County (Continued from April 5, 2022)

Mr. Uken did a brief review of some items that had been discussed previously. At the previous meeting the task force had narrowed the recommended models to options A (Retail model) and C (Public-private partnership). The committee is still in agreement on those options.

There is also support for the County Executive to issue either an RFQ or an RFI for private providers. We had talked about working with Finley Engineering to develop that RFI. Some of the items we felt should be included in the RFI include: 1.) the area that the ISPs would be looking at/applying for; 2.) what their budget was for the project including how much of their money they were investing, how much they would need through grants and how much they would be asking for in County ARPA funds and 3.) the type of connectivity they would have. Would it be fiber, wireless or a hybrid.

Discussion moved to the options for the county contribution. The budget approved for FY22 had $3 million allotted for broadband. Any consulting expenses come out of this budget number. Potentially, there may be another $7 to $9 million allotted in FY23. That would bring the total to $10 to $12 million.

Mr. Uken asked when the budget process started. Mr. Thorsland said it starts now and wraps up in the late fall and that there are several steps along the way. Broadband is one of the boards big priorities. Mr. Passalacqua stated he was not sure we would get that much money in the next allocation. Discussion continued on what the potential for funds might look like. The board is also looking at where they can use ARPA funds to get matching funds and that broadband is one of those areas.

The Task Force will need to look at what we think we'll need and the RFI will help us come up with those amounts. Mr. Thorsland reminded the task force that we have given the Executive direction to do the Statistically Valid Survey and once we have those results that will help when applying for grant funding.

Discussion moved to the Community Survey. RPC does not have the manpower at this time to do the survey. The Executive has reached out and she has someone else to do this survey, Maryalice Wu with the U of I. Ideas where then discussed about topics for survey questions. Ideas included:
    *Would you consider switching
    *Costs – what are you willing to pay and/or are you willing to pay for one-time costs
    *Level of cooperation to help with right-of ways
    *Quality or level of service increase for which people will change
    *Easements and costs for those
    *What do you want in exchange for going across land (easements)

Mr. Thorsland said the survey will serve a couple of purposes; one is leverage for grant money and the other is 'bait' for ISPs. ISPs want to know how many new users they may get; so we need to include questions that are attractive to ISP providers so they can glean ideas of coverage areas and general consensus of area.

Jason Young, with Volo, was still present and was asked what type of information would be relevant to providers. He said definitely price points; there is a point of diminishing returns so knowing viability for backbone to be built in those areas and people want the service; types of uses they'll be using (streaming, emails, etc.); easements and if they're willing to participate. Mr. Passalacqua asked if technologies are somewhat the same across the various ISPs. The technology is the technology, other providers would have the same opportunity to put the time, effort and matching funds into the project.

Mr. Smeltzer asked about the applications as related to agriculture. Will it be used for precision ag and not only need connectivity for your home but for a combine, tractor, etc.? Mr. Young said they have initiated conversations with the U of I Extension Service and the Commercial Ag Department to understand the implements used in precision ag and the geography of their networks. This is a big project that will create partnerships and it's important for those partnerships to share the information back and forth. They would like to see the U of I Commercial Ag Department and Extension involved in the survey process for the networks they already have established. It would help show the financial impact on farms.

Mr. Uken said we could also re-use some of the questions Finley asked originally. Maybe not all they used, but some that would be relevant.

County Executive Kloeppel had joined the meeting and some questions that had been raised earlier were now able to be answered more completely. Maryalice Wu will be administering the survey. There is still some discussion as to if it will be through the U of I or if she will be doing this independently. We would like to have the survey completed by the end of June. The cost was within what she was able to do, and the County Board has approved the additional funds. She has also signed an extension of the contract with Finley for the ISP selection. Ms. Kloeppel was also able to confirm that ARPA Broadband funds can be matched with other federal funds.

Ms. Burnett suggested that another question for the survey might be how long they've been with their current provider and the quality of service they receive.

Project oversight was discussed; this is with Finley through an extension of the contract. Ms. Kloeppel said that this for the second phase of planning. They will help us choose ISPs that were interested and had the capacity to cover all parts of the county. They would talk with them about what types of things they would be willing to provide. That would help us decide and make a recommendation to the Board about how we wanted to spend County money. The cost is $28,100 and they will do whatever to help us get that phase done. Mr. Uken said that part of that would be to help us craft the RFI and evaluate the responses from the ISPs.

Mr. Thorsland asked if we know more now about the RDOF areas and if they have approvals? Ms. Kloeppel responded that we do not know any more at this time. She did note that the Connect Illinois funds are out from the state, and she has been approached by two different companies for letters of support. Mr. Uken said that NextLink has not yet received the final approval from the Feds.

Potential barriers to the project were discussed. Could Planning and Zoning help with any challenges with any easements or zoning ordinances/fees? The Zoning Board could not do much about easements. Discussion was held on what things Planning and Zoning could do like possibly waive fees, help with special use permits, etc. The task force would rather money go to the project and not for fees. What are the definitive needs of the ISPs for this? Can they identify things that can be done to help with this process? This can be included in the RFI.

Community engagement was then discussed. We need a community engagement leader to help promote this project. Ms. Kloeppel said that the part of role of the community engagement leader would be to produce some marketing for what the County is trying to do. We need a representative to go out to speak to groups, respond to the media, etc. We need a central coordinator. The Farm Bureau has been suggested as they have several contacts already.

Ms. Burnett asked what the local governments role is in this project? Mr. Uken answered that the local communities need to be kept informed. That's the role of community engagement. Whoever leads that component will need to communicate and visit with the mayors and village boards to keep them updated on the status of the project, keeping them engaged and asking for letters of support. Will have to marketing by a newsletter, a website, etc. to keep them informed. Mr. Passalacqua added that it becomes an ad campaign.

The question was asked about using interns from the U of I to help with this type of project. Even with the use of interns we would still need a coordinator to keep the project focused and organized.

The consensus was to have the County Executive move forward on the items discussed today.

B. Broadband Needs for the Housing Authority of Champaign County

Ms. Burnett addressed the task force on the needs of the Housing Authority. The main needs they have are for reliable, fast and affordable broadband. Seventy-five percent of their participants are considered extremely low income and another 15 to 20% are low income. The majority of families are at the bottom when it comes to economic status. The pandemic hit them exceptionally hard. If they were able to get hots spots because they had children in school, it didn't cover the capacity that they needed for virtual learning.

Along with affordable broadband, they also need devices. The have been able to provide 150 families with low-cost computers and hot spots. They need training and technical support on how to use the devices. This is something they would like to expand on but during Covid that was difficult.

The Housing Authority also has a high Senior population and maybe all they have are their phones. They don't know all the capabilities of that device. The Housing Authority is going paperless by the end of the year; everything will be online. Ms. Burnett said she did not know how some families were going to be able to do with that.

These needs are across all their locations across the county.

Ms. Carter asked if a map of the UC2B fiber could be provided to Ms. Burnett. Mr. Smeltzer said that there is fiber to the curb of all the HACC facilities. There are still costs associated with getting it to all the buildings in a facility. They are trying to tackle that under one of several programs that are coming. One specifically is for digital equity and looks at the economics of people living in an area that already has broadband. It looks at how you get it fixed for the low-income families.

Ms. Carter asked if there is anything that the Housing Authority should be doing to get ready for this process? They probably already have the information needed for the grant applications. There are people working on this.

This topic will have to be continued at the next meeting.

VIII.   **Other Business**
A. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting has not been set. Mr. Uken will work on finding a date that will work.

IX.   **Chair's Report**

There was no Chair's Report.

X.   **Adjournment**

Mr. Uken adjourned the meeting at 5:48 p.m.

Please note the minutes reflect the order of the agenda and may not necessarily reflect the order of business conducted at the meeting.