FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE
STUDY SESSION
RE: American Rescue Act Funding

County of Champaign, Urbana, Illinois
Tuesday, June 29, 2021 – ***6:00 P.M. *PLEASE NOTE TIME**

Shields-Carter Meeting Room
Brookens Administrative Center
1776 East Washington Street, Urbana, Illinois

MINUTES – Approved as Distributed on September 14, 2021

Members Present:	Samantha Carter, Lorraine Cowart, Aaron Esry, Stephanie Fortado, Jim Goss, Stan Harper, Jordan Humphrey, Mary King, Jenny Lokshin, Diane Michaels, Kyle Patterson, Jacob Paul, Emily Rodriguez, Chris Stohr, Jennifer Straub, Steve Summers, Leah Taylor, Eric Thorsland, Jodi Wolken
Members Absent:	Titianna Ammons, Jim McGuire, Brad Passalacqua
Others Present:	Darlene Kloeppel (County Executive), Megan Robison (Recording Secretary)

Agenda Items

I. Call to Order

Chair Fortado called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m.

II. *Roll Call

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

III. Approval of Agenda

MOTION by Mr. Esry to approve the agenda; seconded by Ms. Taylor. Upon roll call vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

IV. Public Participation

None

V. Communications
A. Additional community suggestions

Ms. Fortado stated she will be putting the additional letters received from the community in these packets. She also mentioned the July 19th Study Session will be held to discuss needs with the immigrant community.

Mr. Patterson acknowledged the historical significance of the first in-person meeting in 15 months and the efforts made by staff to make the remote meetings work.

Ms. Carter joined the meeting at 6:15 p.m.

VI. **Presentations/Discussion**

A. Brad Uken, Manager and Mike Briggs, Co-Chair of the Champaign County Farm Bureau Broadband Committee – Champaign County Farm Bureau

Mike Briggs, Co-chair of the Farm Bureau's Broadband Committee, began by giving background information about the Farm Bureau and why they are involved in broadband. In 2020, they began to look at broadband and the impacts it has on agriculture. They have surveyed their neighbors and the rural school districts. They found that 47% of those surveyed are under or unserved and 45% stated high speed internet is not affordable. Mr. Briggs listed the ARPA requirements for broadband and gave the Farm Bureau's recommendation. They would like to see the County Board use ARPA funds to improve access and affordability to broadband throughout Champaign County by developing a third-party navigator to coordinate the investment.

Ms. Rodriguez asked if the Farm Bureau knew what the federal government may be providing in the future for broadband. Mr. Briggs said they have looked at grant options from the state and federal governments and have been trying to communicate with the providers to support them in receiving that grant money. Conversation continued from Board members to clarify some of the information given in the presentation and to explain that a navigator would ensure the whole County is served and finding matching funds.

B. Lilly Walton, Executive Director and Stephanie Burnett, MTW & Client Outreach – Housing Authority of Champaign County

Ms. Walton and Ms. Burnett began their presentation by giving the Housing Authority's mission statement and some background about their agency. They explained that it is very important to bridge the gap between resources and opportunities for this low-income community. Having fast, reliable broadband service can increase household income by 3%. They continued by explaining their current plans and programs, including how broadband would benefit these programs.

Ms. Rodriguez asked about access to providers and what they thought would be an equitable use for the ARPA funds. Ms. Burnett explained that access isn't necessarily an issue, it is more of an affordability problem for their community. The Housing Authority would also like to see an open Wi-Fi system within Champaign/Urbana and more provider options outside of the cities. Ms. Lokshin and Ms. Carter asked more questions about ways the Housing Authority assists with access to the internet.

C. Michael Smeltzer, Board Member – UC2B

Mr. Smeltzer began by giving some background information about himself and how he got started in the broadband field. He then gave five suggestions on how to get started providing broadband to the County. He gave information on the current broadband structures within Champaign/Urbana and their plans to expand moving forward. Then he moved on to ideas for getting broadband to the rural areas. He explained the three ways to get internet to everyone would be through a fiber system, wireless system or a hybrid system. He also gave pros, cons and estimates of these different types of broadband projects. He finished his presentation with his recommendation to build a robust hybrid broadband system to cover the entire County.

Ms. Rodriguez asked if he had any thoughts on how to encourage competition between companies instead of limiting the competition. Mr. Smeltzer mentioned the option to provide an open access network that might encourage competition.

D. Service Providers:

Ms. Fortado introduced the next section of the agenda by explaining that this will need to be a private/public partnership and there is a need to hear the providers perspective and ideas. She asked them to answer five questions: where you are located, where do you have service, where do you envision service coming in the near future, what can the County Board do to help you bring fiber out to the County and how can you make it affordable.

1. Art Svymbersky, Manager of Government and Regulatory Affairs and Deb Piscola, Sr. Director of Government and Regulatory Affairs – Comcast

Mr. Svymbersky gave some information about Comcast as a company. They employ 76 employees locally and they serve 9 communities in Champaign County. He also explained the services they provide, including a program for low-income families. Comcast would like to work with the County Board to identify unserved areas, find available funding options and increase broadband access to low-income households.

Ms. Straub asked how many people would be able to Zoom at the same time while using the program built for low-income households. Mr. Svymbersky explained there are a lot of factors that weigh-in but typically 3-4 people could Zoom simultaneously. Mr. Paul asked if they own all of their fiber or if any of it is leased. Mr. Svymbersky explained that Comcast has laid most of their fiber but there are a few places where it is leased. Ms. Lokshin asked about how families are defined as low-income, and it was explained that they just require that the individual is receiving some type of government assistance. Ms. Rodriguez asked about personal data sharing, what the financial benefit to Comcast for that data would be and about having a monopoly on the access. Ms. Piscola explained that data sharing is just used for the marketing of information to the consumer, they are prohibited from selling the data information and Comcast is mandated by the federal government to have non-exclusive franchise agreements. Ms. Fortado asked if their current infrastructure is scalable to the higher speeds. The Comcast officials explained they would not have to lay new lines for the higher speeds, and they are currently testing those speeds on their network.

2. Mike Elam, VP Community Affairs & Market Development – i3 Broadband

Mr. Elam introduced the three other i3 Broadband representatives that are joining him; Brian Olson, the Chief Operating Officer, Josh Bradbury, the General Manager for Illinois and Christy Wall who runs the operations in Champaign/Urbana. i3 Broadband is the largest fiber to home provider in central Illinois and has been partnering with UC2B since 2014 with their headquarters in Peoria. Mr. Elam provided a map to show where they currently have service and what areas are under construction. Their suggestions would be to follow the ideas given by Mr. Smeltzer and work together with everyone in this field.

Ms. Carter mentioned how affordable their service is and Mr. Bradbury shared the fact that they have not raised their prices since they began to offer internet to residential customers. While discussing internet speeds, Mr. Elam explained that fiber speeds are expandable, and they are ready to send out the higher speeds when they are needed. Ms. Rodriguez asked how they would handle the need for wireless solutions, and it was explained that they only deal with fiber to the home and that is why it is important to have multiple partnerships to have additional solutions for the community needs.

3. Michael O'Linc, President of Infrastructure – Pavlov Media

Mr. O'Linc began by explaining that Pavlov Media is based in Champaign and they primarily provide service to off-campus student housing in 42 states. They are currently working to expand to the fiber-to-

home area and are in Piatt County, Tolono, Mahomet and Savoy. He explained it is very difficult to build fiber out to the smaller communities.

Board members continued to discuss building fiber to the rural areas and the problems with Mr. O'Linc. Mr. Paul asked about municipal co-op's and it was explained that it is not their primary business plans because it is not profitable for them.

4. Peter Folk, CEO – Volo Broadband

Mr. Folk explained that he founded Volo Broadband in 2002 and it is locally owned and operated. He stated that Volo provides fiber and wireless services but they the fiber. They have one of the lowest cost fiber services and they try to work with their customers to provide payment plans when they get behind on their payments. Volo provides services to rural and urban areas in Champaign County. Mr. Folk explained that fiber is the most robust and affordable option.

Mr. Stohr asked why wireless is less desirable. Mr. Folk explained that wireless is more of a short-term solution. Wireless can have many obstructions in the way

VII.   Adjournment

Chair Fortado adjourned the meeting at 9:13 p.m.