



**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY BOARD
BROADBAND TASK FORCE AGENDA**

County of Champaign, Urbana, Illinois
Monday, March 21, 2022 - 6:30 p.m.

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

MINUTES – Approved as Distributed April 5, 2022

Members Present: Samantha Carter, M.C. Neal, Brad Passalacqua, Kyle Patterson, Mike Smeltzer, Eric Thorsland and Brad Uken

Members Absent: Samantha Burnett and Jacob Paul

Others Present: Sean Middleton and Tim Arbeiter with Finley/CCG Consulting, Darlene Kloeppe (County Executive), MaryEllen Wuellner (Grant Writer) and Mary Ward (Recording Secretary)

Agenda Items

I. Call to Order

Mr. Uken called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m.

II. Roll Call

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

III. Approval of Agenda/Addendum

MOTION by Mr. Thorsland to approve the agenda, seconded by Mr. Smeltzer. Upon voice vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

IV. Approval of Minutes

A. October 26, 2021

MOTION by Mr. Passalacqua to approve the minutes of the October 26, 2021 meeting, seconded by Mr. Neal. Upon voice vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

V. Public Participation

Jason Young, Volo Internet & Tech, spoke regarding a shared vision of this project. They have a strong desire to assist in the rural expansion of fiber networks throughout Central Illinois and Champaign County.

VI. Communications

Ms. Kloeppe introduced Mary Ellen Wuellner, who is a Grant Writer for the County.

VII. New Business

A. Overview of Broadband Plan Report by Finley Engineering/CCG Consulting

Sean Middleton, Director of Strategy and Operations, and Tim Arbeiter, Director of Broadband Consulting, for Finley Engineering gave an overview of the Broadband Plan Report. They have done a number of these reports and it is tailored to the entity they are working for.

Doug Dawson is the principal person who wrote the report and prepared the presentation for tonight. The scope of the project was to give the County an actionable, non-dust collecting report with details to think about what the next steps are and how grants will figure in. Grants are what's driving everything in the industry today. There are three major uses of the report: inform elected offices and the public about broadband issues, provide a framework for how to move forward and provide the facts that are needed for ISP's interested in serving the county.

The analysis was done for all areas outside of Champaign-Urbana. They did a secondary split and removed the larger towns that have a cable provider and a third split of the rural areas into places that are covered by tentative RDOF broadband awards and those without. They also looked at the existing ISPs that serve the county. RDOF was explained and the issues with it. They have taken RDOF funds into account in the study. Maps were shown that showed areas where RDOF had been awarded and what future speeds might look like with RDOF.

Mr. Neal asked about upload/download speeds; the 100/20 is that something new from the FCC. Mr. Aribeiter said that the new definitions that have come out call for the gold standard of 100/100 with a fall back of 100/20.

As part of the study they did market outreach with surveys for residents/businesses, online speed tests and interviews with stakeholders. There were some surprises in the responses; 10% of households don't have home broadband, 70% of those responding have someone working at home at least part-time and 19% of homes have someone working full-time. 73% of residents support building a fiber network and another 26% might support it but need more information. Business surveys and interviews showed the most common problems were slow broadband in daytime and occasional outages. It is more difficult to sell rural homes if they don't have good broadband. They were impressed by how tech savvy the farmers are in Champaign County but are now frustrated because the newer technology maybe doesn't work right with the older broadband. Speed tests were pretty typical.

They were asked to look at all the technologies available to close the gaps. Their recommendation is that passive option network fiber technology is the best fit for the County. Fiber required: whole study area (county less Champaign-Urbana) 1,956 miles; rural areas (larger towns taken out) 1,332 miles and in the non-RDOF areas 920 miles. The plan allows for redundancy and future growth.

Total cost of a new network for the Whole Area is \$164,412,788; Total Rural is \$71,765,175 and the No RDOF Areas is \$54,376,990. Cost per passing for the Whole Area is \$4,088; Total Rural is \$10,872 and No RDOF is \$11,744.

Grant funding will be mostly aimed at rural areas, but states will have a say in who gets funding. The state of Illinois will have several rounds of state broadband grants. Mr. Smeltzer asked if they are confident that ARPA funds can be used a local matching funds for grants? The assumption is that they will be, but we won't know for sure until they drop the official regulations this summer. Mr. Smeltzer said if the County can't use ARPA funds, that will be a game changer. There is other funding through the state that ARPA funds can be used. Connect Illinois program is well designed and easy to read/understand.

Strategic questions that need to be look at include: *What to do about RDOF areas? We don't know what will happen with these areas. Would the county consider partnering with a wireless provider? *Is the County willing to help fund a solution? If so, how much and in what manner? There are a lot of scenarios to consider. *What is the County's best role in finding a solution? Important to determine your role in the process.

What are the next steps? Need to identify staffing resources to help keep it moving forward. Reach out to ISPs who could be potential partners. It's better to talk to them early in the process. Many

ISPs are enrolled in the low-income programs, and they should be asked about this. Community Outreach is important. You need to involve the public in the process. Have listening sessions, etc. No one likes to be surprised. Statistically Valid Surveys are important and might require more than one. Review local fiber policies to see if there are any barriers standing in the way. Look at filing fees, permits, easements, etc. to make it easier to accomplish the task. Mr. Patterson asked what are the barriers to the project? That was not a part of the scope of the project, but it's better to be proactive with that rather than wait until something is an issue.

B. Discussion of Broadband Plan Report

Mr. Passalacqua asked if fiber all the way was the recommendation and if they had taken everything into consideration when making the recommendation – easements, miles, etc. Yes, everything was considered. They actually had people drive the county and make assessments. A consideration with wireless is that the frequency spectrum is getting full. With some of the requirements of grant funding, it would require a lot of spectrum. Another consideration was the ease with which cable can be buried owing to the fact that Champaign County is relatively flat. It's also an option to run the cable aerially in some areas. There was also discussion on the longevity of both buried and aerial cable.

Mr. Uken wanted to clarify the speeds in relation to ARPA funds. 100/100 is what is in ARPA or scalable to that. 100/20 is acceptable but must be able to prove scalability. The absolute goal is 100/100. The fiber network they are suggesting is gigabit capable symmetric both ways. One reason they did not suggest wireless is because with today's technology, when companies are running speed tests, they are struggling to get to 100/20. There is also language in the guidelines that talks about reliability, consistency and being able to support multiple devices. Upload is now more important with the advent of Telemedicine, use of Zoom/video, educational purposes, etc. We need to be looking toward the future.

Mr. Uken said that looking toward the future is spot on. He's spoken with a lot of people who would be happy with something better than what they have now. We cannot be happy with just slightly better; we need to shoot for 100/100. This is probably a once in a generation for funding. We need to look for the future and shoot for that.

Mr. Thorsland said they have made a good case for fiber. His question was about the RDOF areas and when we might know if the companies that won those areas are going to commit. That will impact what we might do and how we do it. He also asked if costs were factored in for the easement process, damage costs like broken tile, etc. Those costs to build were all factored in and are based on their previous experience. Easements were also discussed; they can be touchy. The community engagement part becomes critical in helping with easements. Mr. Uken stated that in the plan report they may have over-stated the ease of getting easements. He then spoke to the RDOF question. The biggest one of the three that have been awarded in Champaign County is moving ahead. They have been to ELUC and have a case before ZBA. They've been approved and have not yet received any money, but they are moving forward with wireless and feel they can get to 100/100. Mr. Arbeiter explained the process for the RDOF funds. He feels that within a few weeks we will know that RDOF Phase I is done.

Mr. Smeltzer complimented them on their report and that it was very thorough. He thinks that there is an error on the bottom chart on page 7 having to do with the number of passings in the Without RDOF column. He believes the residential number is in correct. Maybe it should be 3,643 instead of 6,643. This same chart is also on page 136. They will check into that make sure it is correct.

Ms. Carter asked if they had pre-Covid numbers of households without internet. Would like to see those numbers as a comparison. She also asked if we should be looking for a partner provider as a next step. That is important piece to be considered and finding the right partner is critical to success.

They can go back to census data and the American Communities Survey and will be able to get some comparisons and will provide that to the committee.

Ms. Wuellner thought the financials were very thorough, but the amount is very much contingent on the take rate and the grant is contingent on the take rate. How do you know how much funding to go after when you don't know what the take rate will be? Those numbers are based on their experience after doing this for several communities. It is conjecture but based on evidence. Ms. Wuellner then asked if you applied at a lower take rate but then were really successful and were above that rate, would they ask for the money back? The grant process is usually designed for projects to be successful and some of that is built in. Typically, they do not ask for money back. Mr. Smeltzer said that would be a good problem to have if we asked for 40% and got 60%.

Mr. Neal asked about reaching local ISPs for fiber and if no one is found and a wireless provider, who already has spectrum, would want to work with us would that be a route we could take or would you still recommend a fiber network. Mr. Middleton said that would be an option especially if they have RDOF funds. That could be a very strategic play on our part to partner with them. If they are holding spectrum and not having to acquire new, that could be a game changer.

Mr. Uken said that the company that won the largest amount of RDOF funds in Champaign County is planning to ask for support and money to go along with that.

Mr. Middleton stated that what we have paid for with this study is the most critical piece of what going into a grant is going to need. Market research and the high-level design in the budget is the heavy lifting you need to move into that. You are now in a position where you have actionable info that can be used for grant funding.

Mr. Uken said that the key points for the next steps are on pages 13-20 of the report. He would like to have everyone read those pages and then meet in the next two weeks and focus the discussion on those pages.

VIII. Other Business

A. Date of next meeting

The date of the next is to be determined. Discussion was held on the rules on the Open Meetings Act and meetings being held virtually. It was decided to check further into being able to do part of the meeting virtually. Mr. Uken will work on coordinating the next meeting date.

IX. Chair's Report

There was no Chair's Report.

X. Adjournment

Mr. Uken adjourned the meeting at 8:10 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.