

**KANDIYOHI COUNTY AND CITY OF WILLMAR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION (EDC)**

**BROADBAND AND ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES**

**May 1, 2023**

**Kandiyohi County Health & Human Services Building, Willmar and Via ZOOM Video Conference**

Present: Duane Anderson, Kelsey Baker, Mark Boeschen, Bruce DeBlieck, Jesse Gislason, Jason Hulstein, Roger Imdieke, Ryan Nelson (via Zoom), Rollie Nissen and Chuck Stranberg

Guests: Paul Bolle, Jennie-O Turkey Store; Hussein Farah, New Vision Foundation; Zack Mahboub, West Center Interpreting Services and Ken Warner, Willmar Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce

Excused: Tony Kirby, Michelle Marotzke and David Sisser

Staff: Aaron Backman, Executive Director and Sarah Swedburg, Business Development Manager

Secretarial: Cathy Skindelen, Legal & Administrative Assistants, Inc.

Chairperson Mark Boeschen called the meeting to order at approximately 10:02 a.m. The agenda was taken out of order.

**MINUTES—**

IT WAS MOVED BY Rollie Nissen, SECONDED BY Jason Hulstein, to approve the Minutes of the April 3, 2023 meeting as emailed. MOTION CARRIED.

Self-introductions were conducted.

**NEW BUSINESS—**

**Addition of New Member.**

IT WAS MOVED BY Jesse Gislason, SECONDED BY Duane Anderson, to approve the addition of Paul Bolle to the Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission's Broadband and Advanced Technology Committee. MOTION CARRIED.

**2023-2026 Strategic Plan.** Sarah Swedburg reported the EDC's strategic plan took a three-year approach because many of the EDC's top priorities will not be resolved within one year (see attached). The projected outcomes are aggressive, citing 50% of the geographic area of Kandiyohi County served in this timeframe. Strategic objectives are collaboration, lobbying and education, which includes providing awareness and ensuring digital equity. Key partners will be Kandiyohi County cities and townships, local and state legislators and broadband service providers. Support of county projects remains a priority.

IT WAS MOVED BY Roger Imdieke, SECONDED BY Chuck Stranberg, to approve the Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission's strategic plan for broadband. MOTION CARRIED.

## **UNFINISHED BUSINESS—**

**Updates on Additional Potential Projects.** Chair Boeschen reported the City of Lake Lillian plans to work with Hanson Communications and will no longer be part of an actively considered project. Blomkest is affected by this change and may need to be added to a township project. Kandiyohi Township has asked Meeker Cooperative Light and Power Association (Vibrant Broadband) for a broadband installation proposal. Chair Boeschen will meet with townships to lay the groundwork for potential projects to be considered after the state releases the results of the last round of Border-to-Border Broadband Development grants.

## **GRANTS—**

**ReConnect Loan and Grant Program Round 4.** Meeker Cooperative is awaiting the results of its United States Department of Agriculture ReConnect Round 4 application, which will cover a small section of Roseville and Irving Townships.

**American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funds.** Chair Boeschen reported Kandiyohi County has \$3 million remaining in ARPA funds earmarked for broadband. The funds need to be allocated in the next round of Border-to-Border Broadband Development grants.

## **REPORTS—**

**March 2023 State Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant Update.** Results of the March 2023 Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant awards have not been announced. Projects in contention for a grant include Harrison Township and East Lake Lillian/Lake Elizabeth Townships. Charter Communications applied for grants covering parts of Lake Andrew and Colfax Township and a portion of Lake Elizabeth Township.

**Digital Connection Committee.** Chair Boeschen reported the Digital Connection Committee has held two meetings, with efforts concentrated on creating a survey. The meetings have been well-attended, and Hannah Buckland from the Office of Broadband Development attended the first meeting. The committee will meet every two weeks through the end of June.

## **NEW BUSINESS CONTINUED—**

**New Vision Foundation.** Hussein Farah presented information regarding the New Vision Foundation. Farah described himself as a typical Somali whose life was disrupted by the civil war. He received his education in Kenya, higher education in Malaysia, and an internship in Washington DC as a software engineer. In 2003 he moved to Minnesota and became a co-founder of the African Development Center until 2012, when he became a consultant. Following the passing of his dad, he started the New Vision Foundation, which offered its first class in 2016. The first class had two students at the beginning of the year, then grew to 32 by the end of the year. There are 12 schools in the Twin Cities and greater Minnesota. St. Cloud was the first community in greater Minnesota to support a New Vision school and plans are to make Willmar the second with the help of a national grant. The program is for middle school, high school and young adults and focuses on STEM-related fields. Its

mission is to create pathways to success by motivating disadvantaged youth in Minnesota through coding and digital literacy classes; engage responsible companies in IT philanthropy; and inspire progress toward global sustainable development. The foundation lines up internships and apprenticeships locally to encourage youth to stay in their community following graduation. IT provides the opportunity for high-paying jobs after earning one or two certifications, making it a favorable option for those not planning to go to college. The Foundation is funded by community foundations, mainstream foundations, government entities such as the Department of Employment and Economic Development, local counties and its own income. The Willmar project is in the infrastructure phase, which includes preparing classroom space, gaining cashflow to hire a coordinator, establishing a network of potential partners and building enough equity to be sustainable for three years. Farah is working with Ken Warner and Zack Mahboub to finalize space for the project. Midtown Plaza has built out space to accommodate classrooms with noise cancellation and the ability to run computers. The following questions were addressed:

- Is there a target number for funding? Yes, in the short term the Willmar project will need \$30-50,000 to ensure the space is ready for the first class.
- What is the average income in Willmar? \$60-62,000 per household.
- Can ARPA funds be used? This is a definite possibility.
- Will there be open enrollment? Students from anywhere in Kandiyohi County will be eligible to enroll. Anticipated demand will be large enough to require a waiting list.
- Has fee-based enrollment been considered? It hasn't reached that point, and ideally we won't turn anyone away.
- Who are the main employers following graduation from the program? Health Partners, Target and Harbinger Partners. Many graduates go on to study computer science at the University of Minnesota.

The program in Ramsey County has a dedicated employer that trains 10-15 individuals who are guaranteed a six-month paid internship. A pilot program has begun for those who are 19 or older; they are paired with an employer on a six-month program, which could result in permanent employment. Ramsey County uses ARPA funds for these endeavors.

The Broadband Committee will consider a recommendation to Kandiyohi County to provide funding to the New Vision Foundation as part of its digital equity initiative. Farah will return to a future meeting with a specific request.

#### **CURRENT LOCAL PROJECTS—**

**West FTTP—FTC.** The West Project remains on schedule, although a start date has not been communicated. Chair Boesch plans to contact Kevin Beyer at FTC for an update.

**City of Willmar.** No update available.

**Rural Broadband Coalition.** No update available.

**ADJOURNMENT—**There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 11:00 a.m.

**NEXT MEETING—**The next regular committee meeting is **10:00 a.m., Monday, June 5, 2023** at Room 2057, Kandiyohi County Health and Human Services Building, Willmar and via Zoom video conference.

## EDC Strategic Plan 2023-2026

### Broadband Development

*"The EDC will educate, lobby, and collaborate to secure future-proof broadband services through Kandiyohi County."*

Guiding Leaders: Broadband & Advanced Technology Committee

Key Partners: Kandiyohi County cities and townships, local and state legislators, and broadband service providers

Strategic Objectives:

Collaborate: Continue to build and support coalitions of Kandiyohi County communities and townships seeking to facilitate the investment in broadband for the benefit of their residents

Lobby: Strive to secure broadband resources by working with local townships, cities, county and state representatives. Support statewide lobbying efforts that enhance policies for broadband expansion.

Educate: Support education and awareness efforts to build a "digitally equitable" Kandiyohi County in which "all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy" (National Digital Inclusion Alliance).

Vision of Impact

Kandiyohi County creates equal opportunities for businesses and individuals to participate in the modern, global economy and have equal access to educational, healthcare, and socio-spiritual opportunities.

### TACTICS

1. Facilitate collaborative efforts related to recent grant funding for broadband efforts in the county (i.e., Border-to-Border Grant Projects, Line Extension Grant, etc.)
2. Provide information and awareness to communities, townships, and residents on how these efforts apply to them and determine potential needs for education/training
3. Continue to support the execution of broadband initiatives occurring in Kandiyohi County

### PROJECTED OUTCOMES

- Support of broadband projects currently in process/funded and/or awaiting funding notifications and development (serving a total of nearly 4,500 locations).
- Speed maps reflect 50% of the geographic area of Kandiyohi County served (at least 100 Mbps download / 20 Mbps upload)
- Communities have begun to identify educational/training needs to advance broadband use.
- Equal access to education, healthcare, business, and spiritual opportunities is advanced.