

KANDIYOHI COUNTY AND CITY OF WILLMAR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION (EDC)
BROADBAND AND ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES

October 5, 2015
EDC Board Room, Willmar

Present: Travis Bonnema, Donna Boonstra, Dean Bouta, Bruce DeBlieck, Larry Handlin, Linda Kacher, Larry Kleindl, Les Nelson, David Sisser, Paul Smith and Donn Winckler

Excused: Kathy Dillon, Scott Froemming, Jean Marthaler and Justin Mattern

Absent: Mark Boeschen, Wes Hompe and Mike Malone

EDC Staff: Connie Schmoll, Business Development Specialist

Secretarial: Nancy Birkeland, Legal & Administrative Assistants, Inc. (LAA)

Chairperson Dean Bouta called the meeting to order at approximately 12:04 p.m. and introduced new members Paul Smith and Larry Handlin.

MINUTES—

IT WAS MOVED BY Les Nelson, SECONDED BY Donna Boonstra, to approve the minutes of the August 31, 2015 meeting. MOTION CARRIED.

REPORTS

WiFi community grant. Connie Schmoll reported the EDC was awarded the WiFi grant from the Blandin Foundation in the amount of \$17,680. Partners in the grant are Central Community Transit, City of Willmar/Willmar Civic Center, New London/Spicer Public Schools, Willmar Public Schools and the United Way. The equipment to install WiFi hotspots is being purchased. The grant ends at year end with the final report due February 1, 2016.

Hack₂0 grant. Schmoll reported Hack₂0 was held September 18-20, 2015, which she attended. Larry Handlin reported there were approximately 23 attendees with 6-7 of those being on the planning committee. Four projects were worked on with three being apps for local projects: invasive species, which will send out an RFP soon; Willmar's yellow bikes and how to track them—a meeting is being scheduled with the city; fire permits issued for the DNR in Kandiyohi County and how to notify local fire departments when they are being used; and an encryption app worked on by a sole individual. The hackathon was a great opportunity to connect the technology community with those who work remotely. The event went very well, was well attended and had a good community focus. Attendees showed interest in holding another hackathon in the future. Schmoll noted the event was under the budget of \$15,000 (grant funds were \$10,000) and \$5,400 has been reserved for development of the applications. The committee splurged on food for the attendees and also purchased prizes.

State grant expression of Interest. Bouta reported the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development's website has an online form for communities to express interest in the Minnesota Broadband Infrastructure Grant Program for their area, which is due by October 1, 2015. The form includes the area desiring broadband, location of project, number of businesses served by the project, cost and brief description of the project. The expression of interest was completed for Kandiyohi County to include 4,300 buildings north of Highway 12 and 3,300 buildings south of Highway 12. Kevin Beyer of Federated Telephone Cooperative (FTC) provided an estimate of \$80 million to provide broadband to Kandiyohi County. Larry Kleindl commented it was good to submit the form so the state knows there are needs, especially in light of the state's comment that there were few grant applicants for the last round of grants.

Feasibility study. Bouta reported that during the last conference call with Beyer, it was suggested it might be good for Kandiyohi County to do a feasibility study to help FTC understand what the costs might be to provide fiber to the county. There are grant funds available through the Blandin Foundation for such a study with the grant deadline being December 15, 2015. The costs for such a study would be split between the community and FTC. The study would start the groundwork so that when grant recipients are announced in November and if Swift County is approved, Kandiyohi County can move fast to submit an application for the Minnesota Broadband Infrastructure Grant Program. Donn Winckler stated FTC did its own feasibility study in Swift County and Paul Smith noted FTC also did it in Big Stone County. Beyer indicated he will work with this committee on the state grant process. Beyer is concerned with Kandiyohi County's topography with the number of lakes and the population density around some of the lakes. Blandin Foundation grant funds were used for a study for a five-county area consisting of Cass, Wadena, Crow Wing, Todd and Morrison counties. It is possible this committee could follow a template from Blandin Foundation for the study. Grant awards are up to \$25,000 with matching funds required. Kleindl noted FTC wanted Kandiyohi County's feasibility study done after Swift County was approved so the data would be current. Winckler stated Region 6W did an RFP for its area's feasibility study. Schmoll noted Mid-Minnesota Development Commission can assist with the study for a fee. Kleindl noted the EDC could be the applicant and believes the study would need to be done in 2016, however, both Kandiyohi County and the EDC have set their levies for 2016, but noted this opportunity cannot pass by. Winckler volunteered to contact the Blandin Foundation on its grant requirements and deadline. It was questioned if a feasibility study is done with FTC, could it be transferred to another provider if FTC does not go forward? Kleindl noted no other providers have stepped forward. If FTC declines moving forward, the committee would need to search new options. Schmoll commented MVTV met with her about its wireless services and Frontier Communications has five years to determine its use of the Connect America Fund (CAF) funds it received, but it is believed it will be updating DSL equipment. At the meeting with Senator Klobuchar, Jerrell Stanley of Frontier Communications showed a map with the southeast diagonal half of Kandiyohi County being its focus for upgrades. By consensus, the committee agreed to move forward with a feasibility study with the disclaimer that Blandin Foundation will be first consulted. Donna Boonstra understood FTC was working with Blandin Foundation on studies. Bouta will call Beyer to receive clarification on who does the study. Kleindl will present an informal update to the Kandiyohi County Commissioners at their October 20 meeting and indicate there may be a request for \$25,000 to match the grant.

Letter to legislators. Bouta presented a draft letter written by Schmoll in regard to the committee's direction last month to write to Rep. Tim Miller, Rep. Dave Baker and Senator Koenen (see attached).

IT WAS MOVED BY Bruce DeBlieck, SECONDED BY Donna Boonstra, to send the letter to local legislators as presented. MOTION CARRIED.

Other. Boonstra reported she was in Washington D.C. last week and spoke with Senator Klobuchar, who was going to present the information she received from her meeting with local businesses/entities. Senator Collin Peterson informed her it will be difficult to get the Universal Service Fund released. Bouta left a message for Beyer asking if FTC could apply for any of the \$2 billion CAF funds not accepted, but he did not hear back from him. Boonstra believes an established telco must apply for CAF funds so FTC could apply.

NEW BUSINESS

Broadband conference. Bouta announced the annual Border to Border Broadband Conference will be held in St. Louis Park November 18-20, 2015. Handlin is registered to attend as is Schmoll. Schmoll stated as a Blandin Broadband Community, the EDC has a free registration available and if anyone is interested, they should contact her. Boonstra noted interest in attending.

Other. Schmoll distributed an article written by an Iron Range blogger on broadband issues in Itasca County (see attached). Kleindl read a broadband platform issued by the Association of Minnesota Counties on its broadband initiatives goal.

NEXT MEETING—The next meeting is 12 noon, Monday, November 2, 2015, in the EDC board room, Willmar.

ADJOURNMENT—There being no further business,

IT WAS MOVED, SECONDED AND CARRIED to adjourn the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 12:50 p.m.

October 5, 2015

Representative Tim Miller
Minnesota House of Representatives
415 State Office Building
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Representative Miller:

I am writing on behalf of the Broadband and Advanced Technology Committee of the Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission (EDC). For the past couple of years, the committee has been meeting to discuss and research any and all options available to build broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas of Kandiyohi County and to enhance the structures that exist and are not technically considered “underserved,” but are not adequately serving many of our businesses.

In the past months, there have been forums for legislators to hear details about the impact of insufficient broadband access for our businesses. If you have been part of any of the discussions, we applaud you. Thank you for seeking the details and showing your concern. Agriculture producers, technology providers, independent business owners, students and instructors, and people working from home are just a few who are expressing their concerns about operating successfully with broadband infrastructure in its current state. As EDC committee members, we are concerned about keeping our current businesses and the ability to attract new businesses and talent to our area. We need lasting, affordable, high capacity connectivity to address the economic problems in our county.

We urge you to work with us to make a difference in this important infrastructure issue. Please consider assistance in the following ways:

1. Support continuation of the Minnesota Governor’s Taskforce on Broadband;
2. Ensure that the legislature provides sufficient funding in the 2016 Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant Program; and
3. Attend one of our committee meetings to hear about our concerns and discuss other possible solutions.

Our committee meets the first Monday of each month at noon at the EDC office, 222 20th Street SE, Willmar. I can be reached at 320-235-7370 or at Connie@kandiyohi.com to discuss your availability or even plan a special meeting to accommodate your schedule, if necessary.

We must keep this issue at the forefront of our efforts and we are asking for your support. Thank you for your attention. We look forward to your response on behalf of the economy in Kandiyohi County.

Sincerely,

Connie Schmoll
Business Development Specialist
Member, Broadband and Advanced Technology Committee

Broadband issue fills rural halls, demands action in 2016

October 4, 2015 by [Aaron Brown](#) 4 Comments



Fiber optic cables being installed. (PHOTO: Johnnie Pakington for BT, [Flickr CC](#))



Aaron J. Brown is an Iron Range blogger, author, radio producer and columnist for the Hibbing Daily Tribune.

My neighbor John Kannas set up extra folding chairs in the Balsam Township Hall but even those wouldn't be enough.

Last month, John told me that Paul Bunyan Communication was preparing to apply for a grant to expand fiber optic internet lines in parts of Balsam, Lawrence and Wabana, a block of rural townships in east central Itasca County. I've lived in Balsam for 10 years, working as an online college instructor and independent media professional. Residents here contend with almost unusable dial-up connections, thin DSL corridors or expensive, limited satellite service. So when word went out that fiber-to-the-door service might be coming, people showed up in droves for the Aug. 20 meeting.

The township supervisors said it was the biggest audience for a township board meeting that anyone could remember. (About 40 by my count, each one of them representing a spouse or neighbors back home, too). There were more people there to talk about rural internet than when tax levies were being set or even when the roads break up in the spring and the school bus gets stuck.

Moreover, a quick scan of the assembled citizenry revealed exactly zero hipsters. No nerds with pencil protectors. No goth kids on skateboards, either. Grey haired, flannel-clad and camouflage-festooned, the crowd was representative of the township's population. You would never get these people on the same side in a presidential election, a religious discussion or a debate over the best make of pickup trucks. Nevertheless, we all agreed that it was long past time to extend broadband service to our community.

Paul Bunyan's grant application for rural Itasca County is among 44 proposals submitted to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development for communities across the state. The agency's Office of Broadband Development said the project requests total \$29.06 million.

"With grant requests nearly triple the available funding, it's clear that the need for investment in rural broadband access is significant," said Lt. Governor Tina Smith in a recent DEED statement. "The \$10.58 million available this year is a start, but it's essential that the Legislature provide sufficient funding next session."

Under the program, entities can use the funding to pay for up to 50 percent of the cost of expanding broadband service in unserved or underserved regions of Minnesota. The maximum grant available to any single entity is \$5 million. The Paul Bunyan request in rural Itasca County would connect more than 1,200 under and unserved households. DEED is set to announce grant winners in November.

“The Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant Program is serving an important need throughout Minnesota by providing access to high-quality, high-speed broadband service to our citizens, businesses and public buildings,” said DEED Commissioner Katie Clark Sieben. “The increase in applications during this funding round is a reminder that there are still a number of communities that lack high-speed broadband access.”

Last Tuesday, voters in House District 3A cast ballots in the DFL primary for the special election to replace the late State Rep. David Dill. While the election drew attention for the same old controversies about mining, every single candidate agreed that rural broadband would be needed to expand the economy of rural Northeastern Minnesota. The Republican and independent in the race have said the same. In fact, we’ve reached peak lip service on this issue among the entire local legislative delegation.

It’s time to stop stalling on rural broadband. Private companies and cooperatives are ready to step in and serve the demand. All they need is a little help to expand into more remote areas. DEED can do more. Meantime, the IRRRB should ensure that every household in the Taconite Tax Relief Area has access to broadband service.

It’s time to stop shrugging and muttering that cell phone data plans are good enough. They aren’t. We need lasting, affordable, high-capacity connectivity to address the economic problems of our times. In a year where mining and logging have lagged, it’s time for us to use new tools to create jobs and opportunity. We have bipartisan consensus to expand the Border to Broadband program in the 2016 session. [Every single grant on this list should be funded](#). Why shouldn’t they? It’s 2015.

Broadband is an economic issue that touches citizens where they live. Those are the issues that get people of different backgrounds and opinions to show up at township halls to speak their mind. Of course, people also vote in those same township halls. Believe me, no incumbent would want them to vote angry.

Aaron J. Brown is an author and college instructor from northern Minnesota’s Iron Range. He writes the blog [MinnesotaBrown.com](#) and hosts the [Great Northern Radio Show](#) on [Northern Community Radio](#). This piece first appeared in the Sunday, Oct. 4, 2015 edition of the [Hibbing Daily Tribune](#).