

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

MINUTES

November 1, 2021

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

Present: Mark Boeschen, Bruce DeBlieck, Jason Hulstein, Roger Imdieke (via Zoom), Tony Kirby (via Zoom), Larry Kleindl, Michelle Marotzke, Rollie Nissen, Glenn Otteson and David Sisser

Excused: Donna Boonstra, Dean Bouta and Goldie Smith

Absent: Ryan Nelson

Staff: Sarah Swedburg, Business Development Manager

Contractor: Connie Schmoll

Secretarial: Cathy Skindelien, Legal and Administrative Assistants, Inc. (LAA)

Chairperson Mark Boeschen called the meeting to order at approximately 10:06 a.m.

AGENDA—

IT WAS MOVED BY Michelle Marotzke, SECONDED BY Glenn Otteson, to approve the Agenda as emailed. MOTION CARRIED.

MINUTES—

IT WAS MOVED BY Rollie Nissen, SECONDED BY David Sisser, to approve the Minutes of the October 4, 2021 meeting as emailed. MOTION CARRIED.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS—

Arvig's Broadband Plans. Connie Schmoll reported Prinsburg's City Council approved the broadband project with Arvig and will proceed as soon the agreement is signed. The final portion of the project's cost will be financed with a levy. There will be an informational community meeting for the citizens of Prinsburg on November 2, 2021 at 6:00 p.m. Schmoll will make a presentation at the meeting and Marotzke will be available to answer questions about Starlink. Mark Birkholz, Director of Customer Operations and Southern Markets for Arvig will be available to answer any questions about Arvig's services and how it operates. Larry Kleindl mentioned the map shown in the agreement needs to be more detailed in legal terms with respect to the boundaries of the city of Prinsburg.

Charter's Expansion Plans. Kleindl reported agreement details of the first project between Charter Communications and Kandiyohi County are being worked out by an attorney. The agreements for the second

and third projects will be identical with only an address change necessary. Charter's October 15 deadline has passed so nothing will be done this year. Chair Boeschen added another project for Charter to consider, 30th Avenue just west of Eagles Landing, in an area between the Charter and Federated Telephone Cooperative projects. There are duplexes and houses in the area with a total of 23 residences and is located in Dovre and Willmar Townships. The total cost of the project would be \$136,505, with Charter committing \$80,500 to the project using the same calculations as other projects. The remaining \$56,005 would come from Kandiyohi County and the townships involved. Using the same calculations agreed to in previous projects of \$200 per service, Willmar Township will be asked to pay \$1,400 and Dovre Township will be asked to pay \$3,200, leaving \$51,405 for Kandiyohi County. The cost per residence is \$2,400. This project is a little more expensive because it is not as condensed as other projects. This section is excluded from Federated, making Charter the most viable option.

IT WAS MOVED BY Michelle Marotzke, SECONDED BY Bruce DeBlicek, to request up to \$56,005 from Kandiyohi County American Rescue Plan Act funds for the 30th Avenue project with Charter, contingent upon Dovre Township contributing \$3,200 and Willmar Township contributing \$1,400 to the project. MOTION CARRIED.

Vibrant Broadband's Plans. Chair Boeschen reported Vibrant Broadband's situation has become more complicated. During the meeting with Senator Tina Smith the Vibrant representative reported it cannot do 100 megabits per second (mbps) download/20 mbps upload speeds, which conflicts with previous information. Kleindl sent Vibrant information on the ReConnect Loan and Grant Program offered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), asking it to research whether it can meet the speed requirement of 100 mbps/20 mbps. Kleindl requested the results be emailed to avoid any more conflicting answers. Vibrant may have to use the ReConnect Grant to do fiber since wireless cannot guarantee the required speed. Kleindl asked about contingency plans if Vibrant cannot meet the speed. Schmoll suggested communicating with Vibrant now to let them know a full-fiber proposal will be required. Swedburg reported that Ann Treacy, who writes on the *Blandin on Broadband Blog*, published an article written by CTC Technology and Energy discussing changes in the ReConnect rules, such as the inclusion of Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) areas. ReConnect funds can only be used for capital expenses, not operational expenses. The window for applying for the ReConnect loan or grant is November 24, 2021 through February 22, 2022. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) grant proposal is not affected by the ReConnect program.

Glenn Otteson suggested contacting Hanson Communications Inc. as a contingency plan. It is currently working in Pope County directly north of Norway Lake and Colfax Townships and would entertain the idea. Schmoll contacted Hanson about the Prinsburg project, but it seemed happy to hand it over to Arvig and Chair Boeschen has not been able to establish communications either. He requested Otteson's help in persuading Hanson to work with Kandiyohi County. Hanson will request at least 50% cost contribution from the county, while Vibrant will need 80% covered by the county if it switches to fiber.

Federated Telephone Cooperative's Plans. Chair Boeschen reported we are waiting for results on the NTIA grant. Plans have begun with Colfax, Lake Andrew and Norway Lake Townships. There will be a meeting on November 8 at 6:30 p.m. at Lake Andrew Township Hall for the three townships. The leaders of Arctander, St. Johns, Dovre and Mamre Townships have been invited to share their broadband experiences.

American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funds. Letters have been sent to state representatives requesting that funds other than ARPA funds be used for the state's broadband funding.

National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Grant. Grant awards will be announced on or near November 29.

REPORTS—

Broadband Roundtable with Senator Tina Smith. Schmoll reported Senator Tina Smith was in Willmar for a roundtable meeting from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Friday, October 29. The meeting was attended by broadband providers, EDC's Broadband and Advanced Technology Committee members and township representatives. Senator Smith showed interest in what could be done at the federal level to help broadband projects in rural areas. Carson Ouellette, field representative for Senator Smith, texted Schmoll following the meeting to say thank you and that they are already working on some things. Senator Smith talked about new funding, including the ReConnect Grant and Loan Program as well as what has been funded already through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and ARPA. There is a proposed Senate bill for \$65 billion in additional broadband funds. Senator Smith acknowledged and thanked Kandiyohi County for its work on broadband. She believes the federal level needs a navigator to help with the process. Marotzke spoke about information she received at the Portland Broadband Workshop, including the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act and Starlink, a satellite internet constellation intended for rural areas. Marotzke warned Senator Smith that Starlink, "the shiny penny out there," should not become a distraction. Several questions exist, including what is the plan when these satellites start dropping out of the sky, what is the cost of sending out replacement satellites, what is the cost of customer service, what is the life span of the satellites, and how much more could go wrong as opposed to fiber? Once fiber is laid it is usable for at least 30 years. Fiber installed in the 80s is still working, however, reconnecting old fiber to new can be an issue because it is more brittle. People are used to working with the newer product. Starlink satellites are not intended to last 30 years because the technology will change. Congestion is an issue as well. *MinnPost* interviewed Marotzke following the meeting. Birkholz stressed the need for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to decide about the use of ARPA funds for broadband projects. Township leaders Joel Johnson and Randy Kveene spoke about local issues the townships experienced with the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF). Schmoll requested the NTIA grant process timeline be kept, along with a timely release of the Requests for Proposals (RPFs) for the Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant. Providers were asked about bottlenecks, and Birkholz commented that many areas need 60-75% funding from the state instead of 50%, and right-of-way issues were raised. Overall it was a really good meeting. Ann Treacy from Blandin Foundation and Nate Zacharias, Lobbyist for Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition attended and an article was posted on the *Blandin on Broadband Blog*. Senator Smith summarized the meeting afterwards, and Schmoll has full faith she will work to move the broadband projects forward.

SUBCOMMITTEES—

Education/Marketing. Marotzke created a flyer for the City of Prinsburg for use at its community meeting.

Blandin Foundation Broadband Conference. Swedburg reported the conference was great with lots of content. Senator Amy Klobuchar participated for 30-45 minutes, which presented the opportunity to remind her of the ARPA funds issue in regard to the Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant. All of the recordings and notes from the conference are available on the *Blandin on Broadband Blog*. The Emergency Broadband Benefit was promoted for low-income households to receive \$50 off their internet bill each month. College students with Pell Grants automatically qualify. Most providers in the area are participating. Another highlight was Ryan Lange from Lange Ag Systems giving his perspective on broadband use in the Agriculture industry.

Broadband Use in Schools. Jason Hulstein reported there are approximately 30 students at Willmar Public Schools using online classes, which is down considerably from the previous year. All students have an iPad. Students in grades 7-12 are allowed to bring them home, Kindergarten through Grade 6 leave them on-site unless they are out of school for an extended period of time. The school has built-in e-learning days. Packets are sent home with the students for use on e-learning days and information is posted on the school's website. Schools will be required to report on digital equity by October 1, 2022. All families will be asked what type of Internet they have, what devices they have available for use, etc. Willmar Public Schools requested this information during registration, and one-third to one-half of the households responded. The school needs 100% response by the October 1 deadline. Every school in the county will be required to gather this information. Kleindl requested the Broadband and Advanced Technology Committee look into gaining access to this information as it would be extremely helpful when applying for the ReConnect Grant.

Broadband Use in Health Care. Schmoll would like to explore the topic of on-line health care. The use of MyChart has exploded recently and on-line appointments are becoming more and more commonplace. Tony Kirby will arrange to have someone from Carris Health speak at the next Broadband and Advanced Technology Committee meeting.

ADJOURNMENT—There being no further business,

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

The meeting was adjourned at 11:00 a.m.

NEXT MEETING—The next regular committee meeting is **10:00 a.m., Monday, December 6, 2021** at Room 2057, Kandiyohi County Health and Human Services Building, Willmar and via Zoom video conference.