

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

December 12, 2022

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

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

Excused: Donna Boonstra and Dean Bouta

Absent: Goldie Smith and Brian Zawierucha

Guests: Kelsey Baker, future Kandiyohi County Administrator and Minnesota State Representative Dave Baker

Staff: Sarah Swedburg, Business Development Manager

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

Chairperson Mark Boeschen called the meeting to order at approximately 10:02 a.m., followed by self-introductions.

MINUTES—

IT WAS MOVED BY Roger Imdieke, SECONDED BY Michelle Marotzke, to approve the Minutes of the November 7, 2022 meeting as emailed. MOTION CARRIED.

NEW BUSINESS—

Ribbon Cutting Updates. Sarah Swedburg reported the ribbon cutting ceremony for the Arvig project in Prinsburg was held on Thursday, December 8, 2022. Everything went well, with good representation from the Broadband Committee, county commissioners, and the City of Prinsburg. A second ribbon cutting ceremony will be held in Hawick on Wednesday, December 14, 2022 at 3:00 p.m.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS—

CURRENT PROJECTS.

Long Lake – Vibrant. Chair Boeschen reported the Vibrant project, including Hawick and Long Lake, is complete, with the exception of an area near the Old Wagon Campground that was delayed due to Highway 23 construction.

141st Avenue NE – Charter. Although Chair Boeschon did not receive an update from Charter on the 141st Avenue Northeast project (northwest side of Nest Lake), David Sisser reported it is complete.

Riverwood – Charter. There is no update available on the Riverwood project. All townships have been given the balance owed on the project and Swedburg will check to see if they need an invoice from Kandiyohi County in order to pay the balance owed.

GRANTS.

Border-to-Border Grant 2022. Chair Boeschon reported Federated Telephone Cooperative (FTC) was awarded the Border-to-Border grant for the West Project in Kandiyohi County, which includes Arctander, Dovre, Mamre and St. Johns Townships along with five households in Lake Andrew Township. The next grant period opens on December 19, 2022. There will be a period of announcement followed by the opening of applications. Available funds include \$25 million from the State of Minnesota and \$40 million from the federal level. Chair Boeschon plans to reach out to providers to see who has staff time and materials for future projects. Additional funds will be made available through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Kandiyohi County has spent \$2.6 million of the \$6 million earmarked for broadband from American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. No projects have occurred on the southeast side of Kandiyohi County. Kandiyohi County did approve a resolution of support for Frontier Communications and Charter, but neither received awards. CenturyLink and Hanson Communications have not reached out to the county. Vibrant has fixed-base towers fed fiber near Lake Elizabeth that provide 100/10 service. The City of Lake Lillian has shown interest in a project. Boeschon commented that it is best to keep cities and townships intact when creating a project area because they are a necessary funding source. Economic Development Administration grants for up to \$2 million are available. Groups of businesses, such as an industrial park, would qualify.

ReConnect 4. Vibrant Broadband applied for a ReConnect 4 grant, which would provide service to the northeast corner of Kandiyohi County, east of Hawick and Long Lake.

County Line Extension Grant. Chair Boeschon suggested Kandiyohi County delay implementation of the County Line Extension Grant program until residents have the opportunity to participate in the state program, which will fund 100 percent of the expense as opposed to 60 percent by the county. Kandiyohi County had \$300,000 earmarked for the program before the state announced its program. Residents can apply online for the state Broadband Line Extension Connection Program. Residents in communities that publish a press release will qualify. The program focuses on individuals whose property isn't serviced even though there is fiber in the area. The application requires very little information and can be completed in a short time.

ARPA Funds. Chair Boeschon reported the county has \$3,386,000 remaining in ARPA funds that were committed to broadband, but have not been earmarked for a specific project. Funds must be allocated by the end of 2024, and spent by the end of 2026.

REPORTS—

City of Willmar Broadband RFP Committee. Sisser reported the city of Willmar has been mapped and a meeting with the county has been scheduled on Wednesday, December 14, 2022.

BROADBAND DISCUSSION WITH REPRESENTATIVE DAVE BAKER. Representative Baker reported he has not been assigned to any legislative committees yet, but is expecting to lead the Workforce Committee and would like to be assigned to the Energy Committee. Baker commented there are funds available but not spent due to lack of workforce. This is one-time funding, so now is the time to act. Baker will support “clean” broadband bills. He asked about the viability of Starlink as a broadband solution. Chair Boeschen responded that while Starlink has a place in certain areas, for example rocky terrains where lines cannot be dug, it is not a solution for the masses. As more people are added, the satellite pipeline will fill and speed will be affected. Caps on data use are already set. There are too many weather-related issues and unpredictability. For the average household it won’t yield optimal results. There is a \$600 equipment fee upfront and no guarantee it will work. One customer is already on his third set of equipment, all at his expense. When Starlink moves from Gen1 to Gen2, customers will be forced to upgrade their equipment. Starlink’s best market areas would include the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, cruise lines and people who live in house boats or use them for excursions, and people who travel extensively. Kandiyohi County needs the reliability of fiber. It is very competitive when more than one provider is involved. The committee stressed to Baker the importance of government funding for the broadband projects and asked him to be considerate of broadband legislation, clean bill or not. The West Project has a cost of over \$20,000 per household and would not have happened without ARPA funds. Kandiyohi County ranks 53 out of 87 counties in broadband availability, well behind surrounding counties.

DATE OF THE JANUARY 2023 MEETING.

IT WAS MOVED BY Rollie Nissen, SECONDED BY Michelle Marotzke, to change the next meeting date of the Broadband and Advanced Technology Committee to January 9, 2023 at 10:00 a.m. at the Kandiyohi County Health and Human Services Building, Room 2057. MOTION CARRIED

ADJOURNMENT—There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 11:10 a.m.

NEXT MEETING—The next regular committee meeting is **10:00 a.m., Monday, January 9, 2023** at Room 2057, Kandiyohi County Health and Human Services Building, Willmar and via Zoom video conference.



Broadband Committee

December 12, 2022

Kandiyohi County has successfully completed seven projects in 2022 (see handout). We also secured a \$4.9 Million State Border-to-Border Grant in partnership with Federated Telephone Cooperative. A USDA Re-Connect grant application is outstanding, in partnership with Vibrant.

What are our goals?

1. Connect every resident and business in Kandiyohi County to high-speed, affordable, reliable broadband internet.
2. Educate citizens about the benefits of the internet and how to access it through different technologies.

What are our struggles?

1. Existing providers – not upgrading their systems, saying they will upgrade but then never do, increased contributions to infrastructure, staff too busy with other projects
2. Funding – not enough money to cover the entire County with high-speed internet
3. Incoming providers – not enough capital to continue buildout
4. Complexity – the complexity of broadband (speeds, technology, infrastructure types, etc.) makes it difficult to share a concise message with the general public

What can legislators do?

1. Be an advocate for broadband internet. Make it a focus and central to discussions at the Capitol. Kandiyohi County and County Commissioners, the EDC, and the City of Willmar have all made broadband internet a priority, evident through actions such as the County's commitment of 75% of their ARPA funds to Broadband Infrastructure. We ask our legislators to do the same.
2. Pass legislative action to increase staffing in the Office of Broadband Development. With \$42 Billion coming from the Federal Government, we need to deploy these services to underserved areas in a timely manner.
3. Continue support for the Minnesota Border-to-Border broadband grant program. Provide this program with additional state and federal funding to complete broadband internet deployment in Minnesota.
4. Allow and support additional programs like the low-density pilot program. Most unserved areas in Kandiyohi County are too low-density, that even with a 50% match, the project could not be funded. We support the 75% match allowed in the low-density pilot program.

