

Winchester Broadband Committee Approved Minutes 1/10/2022

Members Present In Person: Natalie Quevado, Larry Wood, Leonard Picard, Jennifer Bellan, Nichole Pelkey

Meeting called to order at 7:33 pm

Special Meeting held to hear presentation from Consolidated Communications via Zoom

Jeff from CC introduced Maryellen and Brian.

Maryellen works with communities to connect. Brian works with data analytics and grant applications.

CC received notification that the select board made the decision to move forward with the proposal.

Natalie gave a summary of what we have done so far. We have sent RFI's and the RPF's. Only 2 companies responded. Select board chose CC based on community benefit. Bonding hearing is Wednesday 1/12/2022. We have created a mailing, hired a lawyer (John Rattigan) and working with Rennell to make sure we have all we need and now working with CC. We need the number from CC for construction – the attorney said it is okay for us to put an estimate on the bond.

We are bonding for 50% and will pursue grants for the rest.

Maryellen – There is a huge amount of federal money coming up. She is curious why we are looking for half to come from bonding. She recommends not taking on the debt – look for grant funding instead. She is happy to work with the bond but wondered why we would bond.

Nat – we don't know when the funding will be available and want to get the ball rolling.

Maryellen – We can do it this way – the construction timeline at the earliest is at the end of the year, but realistically it will be early 2023.

Nat – We do not need to take out the bond until October to meet that deadline.

Maryellen – state/fed is working hard to move grants forward. She sees grants to be a month or so out.

Nat – What happens if we can't get 100% grant funded? That would push our bonding process out until next voting cycle in 2023. We can still put the bond on the article. If grants become available, we can adjust the amount of the bond.

Maryellen – when we bond with a town we have an infrastructure fee. Wants to make sure we are not charging some residents a fee and not others.

Nat – That is correct – we do not want to separate funds. Need to keep it fair for everyone.

Maryellen – if there is a grant, there is no fee.

Natalie – what is the likelihood we would get 100% grant funding?

Jeff- need to identify the unserved portion of the town. Knows we did this, but there might be more we have to look at – will need to identify served vs unserved.

Brian – committee did identify the town unserved. 2,476 locations. It's hard to say the likelihood of 100% grant funding.

Nichole – If we pass the bond but then secure grant funding, can we cancel the bond?

Nat/Maryellen – Yes

Maryellen – grants are likely due to amount underserved. Sounds like the committee is saying let's prepare as if the bond is moving forward but if we get grants to use those.

Jeff- this sounds like the right approach – put on the warrant article to move forward with bonding in October and consider this plan B. Plan A is to look for grants and see if we can get funding before October.

Maryellen – we might want to look into a federal grant application – USDA Reconnect Grant. This is due at the end of February.

Brian – the threshold is 120mb instead of 25 mb, so the unserved percentage goes up .

Maryellen – next steps for CC is to get the number for the warrant article and look at grants, but they will need address data.

Brian – what date do we need updated?

Natalie – March

Brian – can we identify what areas are covered by Comcast & Viasfat?

Maryellen – CC will take their cue from broadband committee regarding the grant

Comcast call ended at 8:10 pm

Committee discussed bonding vs grant process and agenda for next meeting.

Next meeting is January 17th at 7:30 pm

Nichole made motion to adjourn. Leonard seconds. All are in favor. Meeting adjourned at 8:28 pm.

A public hearing will be held January 12th at selectboard meeting for bonding.

Next Broadband Committee meeting is January 17th at 7:30.

Jen H make a motion to adjourn. Len seconds. All in favor. Meeting adjourned at 8:32 pm.