

## Fiber Broadband Completion Task Force - MINUTES

First Meeting – 9-15-2021

Held virtually via Zoom, beginning at 6:30 pm. A recording is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mjfwkf9\\_iE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mjfwkf9_iE) [Note: this link has two underline characters “\_” between “9” and “iE”]

Documents/Exhibits used:

- Fiber Broadband Completion Task Force Charge, dated August 16, 2021.

Attended by members Mark Howell, Gordon Brockway, David Hesel, Scott Hopkinson, Gail Hire; all attended remotely via Zoom.

Terri Ackerman from the Select Board was present to observe and answer questions, such as Open Meeting Law questions

Greg Guarriello also joined as observer from the Finance Committee.

Mark Howell called the meeting to order at 6:30 pm and did a Roll Call of five members.

Committee Members briefly introduced themselves.

Gail Hire introduced herself as an at large member and her background – environmental and mechanical engineering and law. Gail spoke about Article 41. As the drafter of the warrant article, she broke down the challenge of wider fiber availability the three aspects or study areas – expediting the installation of fiber to the remaining Town streets that are not served, exploring barriers to Concord Light Broadband subscription growth, and investigating opportunities for expanding fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) and fiber-to-the-business (FTTB).

More detailed introductions were made.

- David Hesel is the member representing homeowners association (HOAs), as a resident of Concord Greene. He previously operated the Toy Shop. His community has come to an impasse with the Town regarding fiber connections after about five years of work, with who pays to trench in to the community from the street being the main issue. The 220 residents have not been surveyed as to whether they would subscribe. He is interested in getting fiber to all communities.
- Scott is the member from the PEG Access Advisory Committee. Scott wrote the plan for Concord Broadband Over the years the PEG committee has gotten many requests about Broadband, which the PEG committee was not charged with handling, so he is pleased to be working on Fiber availability. He feels it would be very informative to identify where are the underserved locations (make-up of the 22%). He thinks there could be a technical fix to the problem of connecting multi-tenant campuses. He personally tried helping a Domino Drive business that wanted Concord Light Broadband, which was a challenge. Scott sees an opportunity to raise the issue of accessibility of fiber.
- Mark Howell is an at-large member. He worked at IBM for 32 years in telecommunications. He was Concord’s Chief Information Officer for eight and a half years. He managed the construction of the Town’s Fiber network, which involved studying other municipalities with community-based FTTH. He realized that the initial focus on business issues led to portions of the town being overlooked. He sees this

committee as having a responsibility to provide guidance and policies, which it will funnel to the Light Plant for implementation. He noted that the fiber completion effort is similar to how citizens have guided the town in sustainability and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

- Gordon Brockway is the member representing the Concord Municipal Light Plant Light Board. His background is in electrical engineering and business management. He has worked for Raytheon on satellite communications, software and systems for Juniper Networks, and now does litigation consulting. On the Light Board he has observed that the Light Board has autonomy for rate-setting, but limited ability to force change. He noted that Comcast was really worried about broadband coming to Concord and the competitive threat that posed; it led to improvement in Comcast internet service. He noted that as a rule the Board wants Broadband rolled out successfully and economically, charging a reasonable rate, and without incurring a lot of debt and having a clear path to profitability; Broadband has been performing “OK.”

A discussion of economics followed.

- Scott noted that profitability was a major concern at the beginning; many failed efforts were studied.
- David Hesel asked about understanding the economics of Broadband being part of CMLP.
- Broadband cannot touch rate-payer resources; electric rate payers cannot support Broadband activity. The financial model was that fiber would be funded out of the Light Plant as part of a smart grid. Broadband had to pay the Light Plant for use of dark fiber. Installation costs were typically \$1700-\$2,000 per house. Costs are parsed into passing costs and the few hundred feet to the house. For each new install, it will be some number of months before the install costs are paid off by subscription fees. The faster you grow the Broadband, the more money you have to advance up front. A controlled slow growth model minimizes debt.
- David – with a high fixed cost for one additional customer took lowest hanging fruit? Scott agreed and added that it is important to understand that only a certain number of customers could be added each year.
- Gordon – Growth businesses need a lot of funds to get started. We could say to the Town, increase our growth rate.
- Scott wants to get the problem statement right before jumping to the solution. Important to optimize the use of contractors viz-a-viz Town staff. suggests categorizing those who can't currently get Broadband. Suggested fixed-base wireless as a possible solution for people who are 500+ feet from the street. He noted that the Town's street lights are operated on a wireless grid with antennas.

Mark – let's get organized. Need a response by this Task Force before the next Town Meeting.

Gail Hire volunteered to be clerk.

Mark pulled up a copy of the Agenda and also read through the Charge Approved August 16, 2021.

Mark – A GIS survey indicated 20-25% of the Town residents have no fiber. He noted that the design of the fiber plant did not cover the whole town.

Terri queried whether this is the final version of the charge. The committee was working with a version dated August 16<sup>th</sup>. Mark noted that the charge called for seven members; the five members appointed comprise a quorum. Will we get more members? Mark suggested we will look into this.

There was a discussion of the language about what FBCTF will not study (including the limitation to not study wireless solutions). Mark – we need to confirm what is the final document. Terri said the committee can come back to the Select Board any time it has questions or wants to change the charge.

Scott asked about how surveys might inform the problem statement, is this survey and meeting with other groups really required. Gail Hire suggested that surveys and meetings with various Town groups are ways to gather ideas from the community and get a sense of what is important to the citizens, to inform policy recommendations.

A discussion of funding occurred.

Mark noted that COVID recovery funds are aimed at Broadband. This Task Force should look at the opportunities (for education support, economic recovery). Policy choices will need to be made. Terri noted that Kerry Lafleur, the Town's CFO, has details on ARPA funding, which is about 5.6 million, with additional opportunities to apply for more. This Task Force can help think through policy recommendations:

Terri – ask Town for a loan? subsidize low income residents or businesses?

Mark - Citing the example of Minuteman Network, free cash flow expenses should be influenced by the Light Board and citizens.

Scott – pay down debt

Mark noted that the Finance Committee (which he previously chaired) sets policies that form “guard rails” and credit rating. He noted the two sides of Concord Light Broadband: the operating budget and the capital budget. The Light Board and the Finance Committee influence the capital budget.

Gordon suggested that the backlog of potential customers who have requested fiber connections could be shortened up by grouping them. This is an opportunity to address Diversity and Inclusion.

David asked if this Task Force has enough time to do the work of the Charge. Scott shared this sentiment; we may recommend more time is needed. Scott said developing surveys can take 4-5 months.

Scott moved to open the nominations for Chair. David seconded. Scott nominated Mark Howell. Gordon and David seconded. Mark accepted. All members voted in the affirmative in a roll call vote. Scott nominated Gail to be Clerk. Gail accepted. All members other than Mark agreed to serve as clerk for future meetings.

A discussion about the schedule ensued. Meetings will be weekly at first to set up a workplan, including meetings with various third parties. Involvement of the Light Plant staff was discussed. Gail pointed out the need to respect the Light Plant staff's roles and that there are two sides of budgeting – operating versus capital – and that staff are more involved in operational

issues. Mark noted that the Task Force role is about recommending policies to be implemented and rearticulating the goals for Broadband; debt decisions are made at Town Meeting. Gordon can carry operational issues regarding Broadband governance back to the Light Board as an alternative to including Broadband staff at the FBCTF meetings.

Mark suggested that the agenda identify the study questions and in what order do we want to address them. He suggested that the Enterprise Budget Book is a useful tool, and noted that the policy of customers paying for underground service is an impediment. Members settled on Thursdays at 6:30pm as the regular meeting time, for 90 minutes, virtual not in person for now.

Gordon suggested getting word out soon about a public hearing, and selecting a date. The survey concept was discussed – an objective is needed and then logistics such as citizen email addresses can be researched.

Public Comments were called for.

Pamela Dritt spoke about public access to Broadband being a real public good. She asked the Task Force to consider the things we can get from universal access to Broadband. Think of from a business point of view with a difference between investment and spending. Dollar amount limits are arbitrary; rather, look at the goals to be accomplished and then how to accomplish those goals for least amount of money.

Terri thanked the committee for serving, and said the Board wants us to come to them for an extension or anything else we need.

A roll call vote was taken to close the meeting, at about 8:07 pm. Mark reviewed some OML guidance about emailing. Gordon reminded members that one-on-one communication is OK as long as discussions are not formed. Terri cautioned against “replying to all.” Mark would like members of public to have access to the same documents as the committee has.