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# Broadband is More Important than Ever

By Tim Murphy & Jeff Hayes

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## Introduction

Broadband, or high-speed Internet, is essential to the way we live, work, learn, and play. This is not a new concept. Consider the following:

- Communities with access to adequate broadband connectivity are known to perform better economically than those without; therefore, inadequate broadband can become a limiting variable to staying competitive.
- Studies show that K-12 students with access to broadband at home are twice as likely to attend college.
- Householders 65 years and older are 3 times more likely to not have a computer in the home in comparison to the total population.
- Social capital is highly correlated with internet use and greatly promotes opportunities for social engagement which is linked to overall health - particularly a concern for those more isolated in rural areas.
- High speed internet connectivity provides individuals access to more information about their health than ever before.

This list goes on. Parts of New Hampshire, particularly more rural areas, often lack the necessary infrastructure to offer quality broadband. This is a function of relatively lower development densities in which the return on investment is less attractive to internet service providers. Other challenges include affordability of service, access to a device to allow connectivity, and capacity for utilizing the technology. This latter set of challenges can be found in areas regardless of development density. Together, these issues have become associated with creating a digital divide in our country and in our state. Add to this the on-going Covid-19 pandemic with stay-at-home advisories and physical distancing, the issues associated with inadequate broadband connectivity become further exposed.

In this article, we look at some of the progress being made in addressing broadband connectivity in New Hampshire. Much of this work is being led by local champions within communities who have learned to be proactive to bring

about change that would otherwise move too slowly. And to assist these local efforts are a number of enlightened legislators who have helped to clarify and modify state law in order to facilitate effective broadband connectivity solutions.

Admittedly, the space limitations of this article will not allow for comprehensive coverage of all that is going on in our state, but we hope to shine a light on some activities which can inform and inspire others in making progress. In the space provided, we focus on activities in which NH's regional planning commissions have been active, drawing primarily from the experiences with which we have been involved through our respective agencies.

## Making the Case for Rural Broadband

As indicated above, broadband connectivity can be an issue in any community – but lacking in adequate infrastructure, rural areas are more likely to be challenged. In many parts of rural NH, lower quality broadband service becomes a limiting variable to economic competitiveness and quality of life. Enhanced and affordable broadband service will facilitate economic development activities that rely on higher speed connectivity not previously available in these areas. Many small and emerging businesses depend on high speed internet due to the very fact that they are small and emerging – that is, their efficiency is made possible by the quality of service available. In addition, workforce challenges are related to the quality of broadband service – whether in the workplace, the classroom or as a basic expectation that a resident has for making a particular community their home. When broadband availability is relatively poor, or costs for services high, the extent and quality of economic development in a community or region will be correspondingly impacted in a negative way.

## Broadband Planning: Ancient History

Broadband technology is fast moving in so many ways. In 2000, a 56 Kbps connection was sufficient to conduct most business on the internet. Today, a common definition of broadband references speeds of 25/3 Mbps (25 Mbps down



### **FORM A BROADBAND COMMITTEE.**

A broadband committee is critical for helping guide a community through the broadband implementation process. A committee could be an official municipal body or an informal volunteer group.



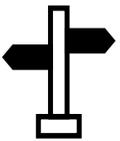
### **ASSESS COMMUNITY READINESS AND NEED.**

Does your community understand the benefits of broadband? What broadband-related challenges do community members face? Is there support for broadband improvements? A survey, public forums, and additional outreach can help answer these questions and others important to implementation.



### **DISTRIBUTE A REQUEST FOR INFORMATION (RFI).**

As a prerequisite for issuing broadband infrastructure bonds, a municipality must issue an RFI to determine which areas are served by broadband and which are not. Even if a municipality does not issue broadband infrastructure bonds, however, the RFI is an important tool for verifying which locations have broadband access.



### **SELECT A BROADBAND IMPLEMENTATION MODEL.**

Information and public feedback collected up to this point will help determine which broadband implementation model works best for your community. Different models may have pros and cons that should be considered carefully.



### **RELEASE A REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP).**

If your community decides to move forward with implementing a particular broadband model, a likely next step is to solicit proposals from vendors through a competitive bid process. Sample RFPs are available for communities to consider.



### **SELECT A VENDOR.**

Vendor selection will hinge on criteria specified in the RFP. Possible factors include, but are not limited to: value/cost of network buildout; deployment timeline; proposed technology and service level; risk exposure to the municipality; projected subscriber fees and surcharges.



### **BRING THE BOND ISSUANCE TO A VOTE (IF NEEDED).**

If municipal bonds are being used to finance the project or a portion thereof, a number of steps are necessary to facilitate the bond issuance. Any municipality pursuing an issuance should retain qualified legal counsel to usher the process along smoothly. In towns with a budgetary town meeting, the bond issuance needs to pass by a 2/3 vote.

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and 3 Mbps up). This change represents a 450-fold increase in internet speeds over 20 years. Keeping up with this pace of change is a major challenge. Data from just a few months ago may no longer be accurate; yet the general situation, issues and corresponding strategies often remain relevant. Over the period 2010-2015, NH's regional planning commissions collaborated with the University of New Hampshire to sponsor our state's participation in the *New Hampshire Broadband Mapping & Planning* initiative funded by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration housed within the U.S. Department of Commerce. The results of this effort included 1) the documentation of areas of the state that are served, underserved and unserved by broadband according to the definition of the Federal Communications Commission; 2) the identification of community anchor institutions (including schools, town offices, emergency services, libraries, etc.) and corresponding connectivity; and 3) the development of regional-scale broadband planning documents designed to address connectivity challenges in NH's nine regional planning commission districts. Although outdated in some respects, these materials provide a benchmark for broadband connectivity in NH and challenges which were identified through this effort remain similar today.

## Broadband Planning: Recent Activity

Left to their own devices, communities have been hard at work investigating effective broadband solutions locally. Municipal officials and other volunteers have seen value in coordinating with their neighbors – whether to share ideas or consider collaborative efforts to achieve a critical mass of consumers which might attract a service provider. Examples of such coordination include the Monadnock Broadband Group and Carroll County Broadband.

The first of these operates under a tag-line as follows: *The Monadnock Broadband Group (MBG) is an informal coalition of municipal officials, practitioners and other stakeholders with interest in understanding and coordinating relative to broadband issues in Southwest New Hampshire.* MBG includes representation from over 20 municipalities, state officials, staff from the NH federal delegation, chambers of commerce, economic development practitioners, and other stakeholders and has continued to meet over several years. Logistical and staff support is provided by the Southwest Region Planning Commission which maintains an active website of MBG meeting materials and related information which can be found at [www.swrpc.org/broadbandgroup](http://www.swrpc.org/broadbandgroup). Meeting agendas include updates on relevant efforts with ATT's FirstNet program

and the FCC Mobility Fund Phase II Challenge process serving as examples; exposure to technical information such as municipal bonding and collaborative broadband models including ValleyNet, ECFiber and LymeFiber; information from neighbors including Communications Union Districts and the Vermont Broadband Innovation Grant program; information on federal and state broadband legislation; and, perhaps most importantly, opportunities for peer learning, information sharing and frank conversation.

Carroll County Broadband, involving all 19 towns in Carroll County, is taking part in a \$250,000 USDA Rural Community Development Initiative grant in conjunction with the North Country Council to conduct feasibility studies and develop business plans to prepare for construction of a fiber-based broadband internet. "This grant is going to provide for a feasibility study and high-level business planning for Carroll County Broadband so we can be prepared to look at USDA funding (eventually) for construction," said ValleyNet Inc. CEO Carole Monroe in an interview with a local newspaper. Expertise outside NH is being accessed by necessity. CTC Technologies in Maryland, and Vermont based Rural Innovative Strategies and ValleyNet are not only providing technical leadership but are putting up matching funds of \$250,000 for the project. The North Country Council and Lakes Region Planning Commission are active in supporting Carroll County Broadband's efforts.

## Legislative Efforts

Significant contributions have been made through changes in state law to facilitate progress in local broadband efforts. In 2018, the NH Legislature passed SB 170 which helped to clarify the use of municipal bonding as a revenue source for broadband infrastructure. Prior to this clarification, bond



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counsel was not in a position to interpret NH law as allowing the use of municipal bonds for broadband facilities expansion in ways similar to bonding for water, sewer and sidewalks. The passage of SB 170 has proven effective in leading to results which are briefly described in the following section.

Resulting from the 2020 legislative session, provisions of SBs 457, 459 and 559 were embodied and passed by the NH Legislature as part of HB 1111 (as amended) and recently signed into law by Governor Sununu. SB 457 allows for the formation of communications districts which are provided the ability to issue bonds in a manner similar to a municipality or regional water district. The idea behind communications districts is that towns require communications infrastructure and service to attract residents and businesses and that many rural communities on their own don't achieve the critical mass necessary to attract a broadband service provider. Therefore, communications districts allow for towns to join together to form an authority for the purpose of addressing needs related to communications.

To issue bonds for broadband infrastructure, municipalities must first put forth a request for information to any provider(s) serving the community to confirm areas within the municipalities which do not have access to adequate broadband service (aka, *unserved*). The ideas behind SBs 459 and 559 help to clarify that a provider(s) must respond to such requests for information within two-months. If a response is not received within this timeframe, the assumption is that the areas are in fact unserved which allows the municipality to move forward with bonding provisions.

### **Municipal Broadband Solutions**

For years local efforts to improve broadband connectivity have been on-going, particularly in rural communities.

Such efforts typically begin with the realization that service providers are less inclined to focus on areas with lower development densities which inspires an individual or small group to step-up on a volunteer basis to 1) better understand the dynamics at play, and 2) explore options for improving connectivity. Forming a broadband committee is an early step in a municipality's evolution to becoming proactive about broadband connectivity. Whether these committees are more formal in their construct through action by the Board of Selectmen or operating informally, it requires a significant commitment of time, energy and brainpower to serve. Once organized, an early activity of the municipal broadband committee is often assessing need and desire in the community through awareness campaigns, surveys, public meetings, and word of mouth. With an improved understanding of existing service and attitudes, these committees are off to a great start in working toward real progress.

As described in the section above, the clarification in NH law brought about by SB 170 has been used to attract service providers to partner with municipalities to expand broadband at the community level. These arrangements are designed to be low risk to the municipality, optional to the resident/business owner, at low cost for those that choose to opt in, and with no addition to local taxes. The Town of Chesterfield is the first in NH to have capitalized on SB 170 by partnering with Consolidated Communications to bring fiber to the address throughout the entire community. Brad Roscoe, a former town Selectman, has been the local champion for this effort and is widely regarded as the architect of the "Chesterfield Model" which has since been adopted (with perhaps slight variations) in other communities including Westmoreland, Dublin, Walpole, Harrisville, and Rindge. Still others are investi-

gating whether this approach is right for them. It's noteworthy that several Monadnock Region communities are capitalizing on SB 170 whose prime sponsors included Senator Jay Kahn (District 10) and Representative John Bordenet (Cheshire 5).

Although newly enacted in state law, it will be interesting to see how the provision for creating communications districts (SB 457) may further improve broadband connectivity and choice. Communities which are more rural may need to join together to attract the attention of a service provider. Communications districts can serve the purpose of formalizing these multi-town relationships and, with the ability to issue bonds, such districts can choose to pursue the Chesterfield Model as an effective broadband solution.

### **And Now a Pandemic**

The social and economic effects of the Coronavirus pandemic have been compared to the Great Depression and we don't know what lies ahead. What we do know is that people are eager to continue to live their lives as fully as possible. This means streaming information and entertainment will be an important part of our collective coping mechanism. But social media and entertainment is only a small part of the picture. Much more fundamental is the need to live, work, learn, and stay healthy. This is where our broadband connection, or lack thereof, has the potential to transform our lives forever. Our jobs, schools and health care delivery systems will never be the same but may be more resilient.

Data since the start of the pandemic indicates the stark economic reality of how quickly a crisis can change our way of life if we do not become more resilient. Within just a few short weeks, unemployment rates in some NH communities reached as high as 40% at the peak of the shut down and many

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towns continued to have double digit unemployment through the end of June 2020. Other communities were not nearly as impacted. Bringing fiber-based internet to rural NH would provide the high-speed internet connections needed for businesses to thrive and people to work from home making our local communities and families more resilient to economic disruption.

NH schools are challenged with how best to meet distancing guidelines upon re-opening with most considering a hybrid approach to include a remote learning experience. Our K-12 students and families in underserved areas are at a clear disadvantage and are often left behind because they do not have sufficient broadband access to effectively learn in an online environment. These disadvantages extend to our college students, especially those attending public colleges, as many may require students to work partially or entirely from home.

From a health services perspective, in many parts of NH, patients are required to travel 1-2 hours (sometimes to a different state) for medical appointments – and some may lack convenient access to a vehicle for doing so. In the midst of a pandemic, the challenges of traveling or transferring to another medical facility can become insurmountable. In cases like this, it is imperative for patients to have the ability to access telehealth services.

### Conclusion

This article has described broadband connectivity as an issue which has evolved over many years. Due in large part to the efforts of many dedicated volunteers including local residents and elected officials, progress in addressing broadband connectivity in NH is being made, particularly in rural communities. Creative approaches have been developed along with new ideas over time assisted by legislative remedies. Funding solutions have been paramount to progress

and multi-municipal collaboration is proving to be an increasingly effective strategy. The on-going pandemic which began in early 2020 – with corresponding stay-at-home advisories, limitations on gatherings, distancing requirements, etc. – has served to further expose broadband connectivity issues. Communities without adequate broadband service can be seen as at a distinct disadvantage as life during the pandemic has unfolded. Work, education, health care, and social interaction have all become heavily dependent on robust broadband connectivity which improves our collective resiliency. In this light, the stakes are higher than ever before.

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