

MEDA Broadband Committee Meeting

March 29, 2021

10am Special Meeting

Present: Steve Simonson, Russ Fletcher, Elvis Nuno, Stephen Walter, Paul Reichert, Paul DeWolfe, Mehmet Casey, Charlotte Lauerman, Brian Obert, Karl Unterschuetz, Geoff Feiss, Austin Trunkle, Allison Corbyn, Mary Roehr, and Gloria O'Rourke.

Discussion of SB297:

Set aside \$350m for broadband deployment. This group was asked for suggestions in spending the funds.

- Strategy is to keep the eye on the prize which is getting fiber to every home in Montana.
- Flexibility, speed are components; remove prescriptive requirements. We want the best broadband as fast as we can get it.
- 100/100 speed is an issue for some smaller companies. Needs to be a mindset change in the industry because of, in particular, upload speeds. Upload speeds and download speeds are now equally important.
- "technology neutrality" is a phrase that means all technologies and providers are given an equal chance for support. The standard ends up being adjusted to meet the provider. This is not a good definition – it should be a standard you want to achieve and invite those who can provide it to come to the table.
- Still, for the person who does not have internet, speeds much lower would be better than nothing.
- This is an historic pot of money for Montana.....let's not invest in something that will be useless in five years.
- To meet the bare minimum is not a good goal.
- Mary is opposed to the 100/100 because of the cost. Her concern is that providers will not be able to meet that rate and the overall goal will not be accomplished. Urban Rural Divide will not be addressed.
- What about the federal broad band money and how will this dovetail?
- Suggest the broadband positions be in the Governor's Office.

Conclusion:

100/100 is the gold standard, but if it means no service would be provided because that rate cannot be met, lower rates are acceptable.

HB657

- Is the 200 million coming from the \$350m?
- Watch the hearing today; then talk with Luke about it.

Select Committee HB632

States \$150million for cell towers, broadband, etc.

Concerns: Shortage of glass, the right sand, and workforce to install the fiber.

SB297: Amendments are in the works. Until the new language is known, this committee will support. Bethany said it is important that projects already in planned format can be eligible for funding.

Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF)

Misc.

- Library study bill is on hold with all of the other activity going on.

Chat:

Russ: RE: HB657 - Any thoughts of including the ability for municipal broadband development? It's in the Federal statutes being considered.

Russ: By Sen. Jason Ellsworth Senate District 43, Hamilton Senate President Pro Tempore, Republican : Driving Montana's broadband development with SB 297 <https://matr.net/news/opinion-driving-montanas-broadband-development-with-sb-297/>

Russ: I'm concerned that we're not encouraging competition to help us get to a level that's economically competitive. I am paying for 400. Just did a speed test and I'm getting 93 which, frankly, is higher than I usually get.

Geoff: I can't figure out how to raise my hand. I think we're all on same page. 100/100 is goal. Department needs flexibility to deliver hybrid solutions. Fiber may not be feasible/economic in all cases. We should shoot first for "unserved" areas. But we should deploy the best solution with 100/100 target. May not be able to get there in all cases.

Russ: Has there been any discussion about what providers can charge for those who will be served by this funding? Mary, most of the info I've heard about other states indicates they're going for 100/100 in order to be economically competitive.

Elvis: Speaking for both myself and my customers, I can say that 100/100 is a better and more useful connection than even 1000/20.

Russ: The cost question moves this closer and closer to a regulated utility.

Russ: Democrats Are Getting \$94 billion Serious About Universal Broadband
<https://matr.net/news/democrats-are-getting-94-billion-serious-about-universal-broadband/>

Paul D: With respect to alternative technologies for remote locations, we should take a good look at the wireless backbones that north central Idaho deployed under the ARRA funding. Very cost effective, especially when you can leverage existing towers, buildings, other facilities that can support. It is the last mile that is challenging for costs and speed.

Russ: Idaho Broadband Articles <https://matr.net/?s=idaho+broadband>

Next Steps

- Meet again April 5th; 30 minutes.