

**MEDA Broadband Committee**  
**August 24, 2020**  
**2pm**

**On the call: Tracy McIntyre, Chair; Casey Mehmet, Steve Simonson, Allison Corbyn, Brian Obert, Brit Fontenot, Jason Williams, Kristian Richardson, Mehmet Casey, Paul Tuss, Russ Fletcher, Geoff Feiss, Paul Reichert, Jerry Meerkatz, Charles Robison, and Gloria O'Rourke.**

**Discussion Topic: Current situations – what are current issues and problems?**

Mehmet Casey, Downtown Billings Alliance:

- Downtown Billings seems good as far as coverage, but knows there are issues in rural areas. One good reason for people to select Billings downtown for their business and/or enjoy internet downtown.

Brit Fontenot, City of Bozeman Economic Development:

- Getting repairs completed has been challenging recently.
- Recruiting for companies that need water, sewer, and fiber.
- Legislative agenda in the works; includes broadband.
- Bigger picture: Montana needs a plan, a person, a place to address broadband.
- Wants to utilize the NextGen Report outcomes.

Brian Obert, MBAC

- Each of the three counties under MBAC use different services; a bit of a hodgepodge.
- Helena has old Touch America power lines through the area; much of it is dark
- AT&T has a duct in the ground...it is still empty
- Treasure State Internet – example of facing rough infrastructure as ran into old trolley tracks
- Inbound technical call centers have parameters that must be met

Paul Tuss, Bear Paw

- Also has a hodgepodge; some rural areas have very poor service, others have wifi in their bar.
- What do you do when there is good broadband in a community to turn it into a job creating opportunity? Malta? Big Sandy? Chinook? A local co-op with great service; how does it turn into an economic development opportunity?
  - Russ: other states have a map that indicates great broadband and then offer Come Home opportunities. He received no response for the offer to create a map for Montana. People are asking for broadband speeds before purchasing a home.
  - Paul T: Challenge to market to, for example, the hi-line as compared to Bozeman.
  - Brit: One example is Ticket Printing in Harlowton. Many workers are remote so widespread coverage is required.

Paul Reichert, Prospera

- It is beyond “we have broadband”; tell the stories of how and where.

Steve Simonsen, Beartooth RC&D – 5 counties

- Also has a hodgepodge of coverage.
- MEDA needs to talk to candidates for this fall regarding this issue.
- Do have data centers in Billings; what is missing is marketing dollars.
- Billings has some “super highways” going through the community but are they being utilized to full potential

Kristian Richardson – MDOC – remote from Whitehall today

- Challenges in south Jefferson County – have some good fiber and some dark. CenturyLink is one company that serves the area. There used to be 32 CenturyLink employees serving that area, now there are 4.
- How to attract first, second, third tier companies to Montana; also increase demand for green energy. Tie them together- attraction and green energy.
  - Russ noted instead of recruiting companies there is interest in recruiting individuals.
- Utilize military veterans with communications background.

#### Jerry Meerkatz – Montana West (MWED)- Flathead County

- There was a meeting in Flathead County area about one year ago to strive to address broadband; conclusions were cost prohibitive.
- Exploring options to increase speeds; searching for funding.
- Many incoming calls of interest in moving to the area from large cities out of state.
- Take advantage of community colleges.
- CenturyLink went from a major center in the area to small. Other providers say service to certain areas is stopped until development comes, not the other way around.
- Larger communities are okay; but if you work outside of Kalispell, Columbia Falls, Whitefish, you will struggle.

#### Allison Corbyn – Big Sky EDA, Yellowstone County and recruitment

- Providers are not always responsive; so even if they have the infrastructure there are not employees.
- Connectivity is challenging and for those that are connect it is not cost effective
- This is an infrastructure need, similar to having electricity.
- Have asked why MT can't use CARES act money for fiber? Other states are using it for that.
  - GOED felt that the funds could not be spent by the end of December.
  - Could there perhaps be a plan created? Maps?

#### Russ Fletcher – MATR.net

- Missoula – dead spots even through the city.
- Speeds are not adequate.
- Legislation prohibits communities from setting up community broadband. It would be good for MEDA to address this and change it.
- Idaho – recently learned about 200,000 students did not have equipment. Idaho's Close the Divide <https://www.idahobe.org>
- MT should join Broadband Availability map.

#### Geoff Feiss – MTA

- Agree – some areas have broadband, some don't.
- Agree – let's identify those areas.
- Skeptical about establishing a new office; learn from other states. Challenge is funding the office.
- Conrad Burns used to say there is a lot of "Dirt between lightbulbs."
- How do we close gaps when identified and closeable? Address costs for low populations.
- We are on the same page; how do we bring 100% quality access to all of Montana?

#### Paul Reichert – Prospera

- Challenge Montana to raise its standards for what it calls "broadband".
- Create a bold and broad vision for the entire state with competitive speeds.

#### Charles Robison – USDA

- Aware of the need to increase speeds.
- Do serve as a financial resource for expansion projects.
  - Jerry appreciated USDA assistance for a 50/50 match for a local provider that had dial up.

Resource shared:

- High-Speed Internet to Come to Rural Indiana Via Blimp <https://matr.net/news/high-speed-internet-to-come-to-rural-indiana-via-blimp/>
- City of Hartford to Build System for Free, High-Speed Internet for Every Resident <https://matr.net/news/city-of-hartford-to-build-system-for-free-high-speed-internet-for-every-resident/>

Next Meeting and Steps:

- September 14<sup>th</sup> 2pm
  - Will be focused on deeper dive into the overall themes on issues/obstacles and Investigating the use of CARES funds
- September 28<sup>th</sup> 2pm
  - Will start with a review of what public agencies and offices are working on (Congressional offices, GOED, Dept. of Commerce – all invited)
  - Follow up on CARES funds