

**RURAL BROADBAND TASK FORCE**  
Monday, May 17, 2021, 3:00-4:30 p.m. CT  
Atrium Conference Center, Room 206  
1200 N Street, Lincoln, Nebraska  
**MINUTES**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Ed Toner, Chair, Nebraska Information Technology Commission  
Senator Bruce Bostelman, Nebraska Legislature  
Mary Ridder, Chair, Nebraska Public Service Commission  
Steve Wellman, Nebraska Department of Agriculture  
Daniel Spray, Owner, Precision Technology  
Ron Cone, Director of Network Information Services, ESU 10  
Tom Shoemaker, President, Pinpoint Communications (Video conferencing)  
Anna Turman, Catholic Health Initiative  
Andrew Buker, University of Nebraska

**MEMBERS ABSENT:** Senator Curt Friesen, Nebraska Legislature; Zachary Hunnicutt, Farmer, Hunnicutt Farms; Isaiah Graham, Vice-President, Homestead Bank; Tony Goins, Nebraska Department of Economic Development

**OPENING BUSINESS, ROLL CALL NOTICE OF POSTING OF AGENDA NOTICE OF NEBRASKA OPEN MEETINGS ACT POSTING**

The chair, Mr. Toner, called the meeting to order at 1 p.m. There were seven members present at the time of roll call. A quorum existed to conduct official business. The meeting announcement was posted on the Nebraska Public Meeting and Rural Broadband Task Force websites on March 26, 2021. The agenda was posted on the Rural Broadband Task Force website on May 10, 2021. A copy of the Nebraska Open Meetings Act was on the table next to entrance.

**APPROVAL OF THE FEBRUARY 7, 2020 AND THE SEPTEMBER 11, 2020 MINUTES\***

**Mr. Shoemaker moved to approve the February 7, 2020 and September 11, 2020 minutes as presented. Ms. Ritter seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Ridder-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Spray-Yes, Turman-Yes, Buker-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-7, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.**

**UPDATES**

**Legislation-Nebraska.** Andrew Vinton, Legal Counsel for the Transportation and Telecommunications Committee, provided the update. Eleven broadband bills were introduced this legislative session. LB 338 was passed and approved with an emergency clause. LB 388, the Nebraska Broadband Bridge Act, is on final reading. This is Senator Hilgers' priority bill.

Mr. Wellman arrived at the meeting.

**Federal Broadband Updates.** Cullen Robbins, Director of NUSF and Telecommunications for the Nebraska Public Service Commission, provided the update on federal broadband programs:

- The **FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit** program for low income families provides a discount of \$50 per month for broadband service and equipment per household until the funding runs out.
- The **American Rescue Plan** has approximately \$195 billion in funding for the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund. Nebraska will receive approximately \$1 billion from the fund. Additional funding is earmarked for local governments. Broadband is an eligible use for funding from the

Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund and the Coronavirus Local Fiscal Recovery Fund. The American Rescue Plan also provides \$10 billion for payments to States, territories, and Tribal governments to carry out critical capital projects that directly enable work, education, and health monitoring, including remote options, in response to the public health emergency.

- The **NTIA Broadband Infrastructure Program** will provide funding to public-private partnerships for broadband projects in areas lacking broadband of 25 Mbps down and 3 Mbps up. The Notice of Funding Opportunity is expected to be released soon.
- The FCC conducted the **Rural Digital Opportunity Fund** reverse auction last year and is reviewing long-form applications of the winning bidders.

**Public Service Commission (PSC) Updates.** Cullen Robbins provided the following updates:

- The Nebraska Broadband map has been updated with June 2020 Form 477 data.
- The PSC has a docket open on transitioning the contribution method for business lines to a per connection fee. A hearing is scheduled for Tuesday morning.
- The reverse auction process is making progress. Price cap carriers are required to inform the PSC how they will use the funding allocated to them by July 16, 2021. Funds not utilized can be redirected to other providers.
- LB 338 requires that any recipient of ongoing high-cost support from the Nebraska Telecommunications Universal Service Fund conduct speed tests and submit the results to the Commission. The PSC will be addressing the requirements of LB 338.
- LB 388 creates the Broadband Bridge Program. If the bill is enacted, the PSC will open a docket for the LB388 Broadband Bridge program. It is anticipated that the docket and public hearing should be completed by October 1, 2021.

## **REPORT FROM THE NUSF SUBCOMMITTEE**

Dan Spray gave the update for the NUSF Subcommittee. The subcommittee met in January and in February to get updates on the Remote Access Rural Broadband Grant program administered by the Department of Economic Development, NUSF broadband projects, USDA ReConnect Grants awarded to American Broadband, and updates from NextLink on their CAFII reverse auction buildout and plans to build out areas awarded in the RDOF reverse auction.

Subcommittee members began discussing the need for more broadband technicians in order to complete new broadband deployment projects. In order to learn more about the issue, the subcommittee met with a panel of speakers last week including:

- Jona Van Deun, Nebraska Tech Collaborative
- Caleb Berg, Southeast Community College
- Don Schoening, Allo
- Allison Hatch, Dan Curran and Nichole Reiner, Nebraska Department of Economic Development

Mr. Toner thanked the NUSF Subcommittee which includes Dan Spray, Commissioner Mary Ridder and Tom Shoemaker.

## **BROADBAND AND AGRICULTURE**

**Approval of Formation of Agriculture Subcommittee.** At the September 11, 2020 Task Force meeting, the Task Force supported forming an Agriculture Subcommittee, but lacked a quorum to approve the formation of the subcommittee.

**Mr. Cone moved to approve the formation of Agriculture Subcommittee. Mr. Wellman seconded. Roll call vote: Cone-Yes, Buker-Yes, Turman-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Wellman-Yes, Ridder-Yes, and Toner-Yes. Results: Yes-7, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.**

Zachary Honeycutt, Senator Curt Friesen, and Isaiah Graham, Dan Spray and Commissioner Mary Ridder have been meeting and have invited speakers to share information and discuss needs. In addition to meetings, members of the task force were invited to attend a precision ag demo in Arnold and Sutherland. The subcommittee has learned that farming and ranching are very different entities with different issues and needs.

Ms. Ridder reviewed the top draft findings from the Agriculture Subcommittee which included:

- Agriculture is a significant part of Nebraska's economy.
- Fully adopting next generation precision agriculture technologies in the United States would result in potential annual gross benefits of up to \$13 billion for row crops and \$20.6 billion for livestock and dairy with over a third of these benefits dependent on broadband.
- Farmers and ranchers need upload speeds of at least 30 Mbps to transfer the immense amount of data generated to the cloud.
- Rural areas of most Nebraska counties—including many of Nebraska's top-producing agricultural counties—lack broadband with upload speeds of greater than 25 Mbps or fiber connectivity.

Mr. Toner thanked members of the subcommittee for their work.

## **WORK PLAN FOR 2021 TASK FORCE REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE AND GOVERNOR**

The Rural Broadband Task Force will submit its next report to the Legislature and Governor Ricketts by November 1 of this year. Subcommittees will continue to meet through the summer. At the task force's September meeting, the subcommittee will present their recommendations. The task force will also hear public comments at the September meeting. In October the task force will meet to approve the 2021 report. The report will then be finalized and submitted prior to the November 1 deadline.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

The terms of the eight members appointed by Governor Ricketts will be expiring on July 26, 2021. Those members include Andrew Buker, Ron Cone, Isaiah Graham, Zach Hunnicutt, Tom Shoemaker, Dan Spray, Anna Turman and Tim Lindahl. Tim Lindahl has taken a position in Kansas. His position is currently vacant.

Mr. Toner thanked these members for their contributions to the task force and encourage them to resubmit an application for executive appointment to serve another term through the governor's website by mid-June.

Ms. Byers will get information and a link to application to these members.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

**Ms. Ridder moved to adjourn. Ms. Turman seconded. All were in favor. Motion carried.**

The meeting was adjourned at 4:14 p.m.

Meeting minutes were taken by Lori Lopez Urdiales and reviewed by Anne Byers, Office of the CIO/NITC.