

RURAL BROADBAND TASK FORCE
Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2021, 1:30-3:30 p.m. CT
Varner Hall, Lower Level, Board Room
3835 Holdrege Street, Lincoln, Nebraska

MINUTES

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Ed Toner, Nebraska Information Technology Commission
Senator Curt Friesen, Nebraska Legislature
Senator Bruce Bostelman, Nebraska Legislature
Mary Ridder, Nebraska Public Service Commission
Nichole Reiner for Tony Goins, Nebraska Department of Economic Development
Zachary Hunnicutt, Hunnicutt Farms
Tom Shoemaker, Pinpoint Communications
Daniel Spray, Precision Technology
Andrew Buker, University of Nebraska
Ron Cone, ESU 10

MEMBERS ABSENT: Steve Wellman, Nebraska Department of Agriculture

OPENING BUSINESS, ROLL CALL NOTICE

The chair, Mr. Toner, called the meeting to order at 1:30 p.m. There were nine 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 July 8, 2021. The agenda was posted on the Rural Broadband Task Force website on Sept.1, 2021.

A copy of the Nebraska Open Meetings Act was posted on the south wall.

APPROVAL OF THE MAY 17, 2021 MINUTES*

Ms. Ridder moved to approve the May 17, 2021 minutes as presented. Mr. Cone seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Ridder-Yes, Reiner-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Spray-Yes, Buker-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-7, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.

PUBLIC COMMENT

The task force received no written comments on the draft findings and recommendations. Mr. Toner invited members of the public to provide public comment. No one present wished to provide public comment.

PROGRESS REPORT ON 2019 RECOMMENDATIONS

Mr. Toner thanked Governor Ricketts, the Nebraska Legislature, the Nebraska Public Service Commission, Nebraska Department of Economic Development, Office of the CIO, Nebraska Information Technology Commission, Nebraska Library Commission, Nebraska Department of Education, and other entities in Nebraska for their efforts to implement recommendations of the Rural Broadband Task Force.

He highlighted two accomplishments:

- \$29.5 million in grants was awarded to 60 projects to bring broadband to 17,600 households through the Remote Access Rural Broadband grant program administered by the Nebraska Department of Economic Development.
- The Broadband Bridge Grant program was established through LB 388 and will be administered by the Nebraska Public Service Commission. \$20 million a year for 2 years was appropriated for the program. The first round of grants is due Oct. 1.

DISCUSSION AND APPROVAL OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*Definitions of Unserved and Underserved**

Members discussed updating the definitions of unserved and underserved to make the definitions more consistent with recent legislation. Members agreed upon the following definitions:

Unserved areas are defined as areas without internet service at less than 25Mbps down/3 Mbps up.

Underserved areas are defined as areas which have internet service at 100 Mbps down/20 Mbps or greater but less than 25 Mbps down/3 Mbps up.

Senator Friesen moved to update the definitions of unserved and underserved as agreed. Mr. Spray seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Ridder-Yes, Reiner-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Spray-Yes, Buker-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-7, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.

*Broadband Availability Findings**

Ms. Byers reported that fiber deployment and broadband availability in rural Nebraska increased between June 2018 and June 2020. However, the FCC Form 477 data likely overstates broadband availability because providers report broadband availability by census block. Members suggested adding a disclaimer and an explanation of what a census block is.

*Findings and Recommendations of the Broadband Data Subcommittee**

Senator Bostelman reported that the FCC is working on improving broadband mapping. However, it is unclear when better data and maps will be available. In 2019, the task force recommended waiting for the the FCC to improve their data collection. Nebraska can no longer wait for the FCC and should initiate a program to map broadband availability for serviceable locations augmented by speed test data.

Commissioner Ridder moved to approve the findings and recommendations of the Broadband Data Subcommittee. Mr. Buker seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Ridder-Yes, Reiner-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Spray-Yes, Buker-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-7, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.

*Findings and Recommendations of the NUSF Subcommittee**

Commissioner Ridder reviewed the findings the NUSF Subcommittee. She reported that since 2019, 19,583 households have been connected through broadband projects funded through the Nebraska Universal Fund. A total of \$36,545,562 is available for broadband projects in high cost areas through the NUSF in 2021. The total remittances to the NUSF have increased from approximately \$32.8 million in 2018 to \$46.8 million in 2021. The increase is due to the Nebraska Public Service Commission's actions to reform the contribution methodology.

Commissioner Ridder also reviewed the recommendations of the NUSF Subcommittee. Key recommendations include:

- Evaluate the results of the Nebraska Public Service Commission's expected reverse auction of NUSF support.
- Coordinate the distribution of NUSF support with other funding sources to avoid duplication of funding and to target funding to areas most in need of support.
- As funding from multiple sources is being utilized for broadband deployment projects, state and federal policymakers will need to develop mechanisms to ensure that these networks are supported.

The NUSF Subcommittee also discussed the need for more broadband technicians. The subcommittee recommended that the telecommunications industry, the state's community colleges, local school districts, and economic development and workforce development agencies should engage in conversations about recruitment of technicians as well as developing training and apprenticeship programs.

Mr. Hunnicutt joined the meeting.

Mr. Spray moved to approve the findings and recommendations of the NUSF Subcommittee. Mr. Shoemaker seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Ridder-Yes, Reiner-Yes, Hunnicutt-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Spray-Yes, Buker-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-8, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.

*Findings and Recommendations of the Agriculture Subcommittee**

Ms. Byers reported on the findings of the Agriculture Subcommittee. Farmers and ranchers need upload speeds of at least 30 Mbps to transfer the immense amount of data generated to the cloud. In the future even greater upload speeds may be required. 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.

Nebraska's farmers and ranchers need multiple types of connectivity, including:

- Low-speed connectivity with broad coverage for sensors and monitors,
- High-speed, centralized connectivity at the farm or ranch operations center,
- High-speed, decentralized connectivity for transmitting live video and real-time decision making.

Recommendations of the Agriculture Subcommittee include:

- Establish a state goal of having broadband access to every farm or ranch headquarters.
- Focus a portion of broadband funding on the highest cost areas.
- Review the initial round of awards from the Broadband Bridge Grant Program to determine if adjustments to program requirements could aid in funding extremely high cost rural areas.
- Survey Nebraska farmers and ranchers on their broadband needs and broadband availability to their farms and ranches, including what percentage of their operations are covered by broadband and where broadband coverage is still needed.

Mr. Shoemaker moved to approve the findings and recommendations of the Agriculture Subcommittee. Mr. Cone seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Ridder-Yes, Reiner-Yes, Hunnicutt-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Spray-Yes, Buker-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-8, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.

*Findings and Recommendations of the Public-Private Partnerships Subcommittee**

Mr. Shoemaker reviewed the findings and recommendations of the Public-Private Partnerships Subcommittee. Grant programs such as the Remote Access Rural Broadband Grant Program and the Nebraska Broadband Bridge program are essentially a form of public-private partnership. Federal funding from the American Rescue Plan Act received by the State of Nebraska could provide additional funding for broadband deployment projects. Governor Ricketts and the Legislature are expected to determine the amount of funding available for broadband in early 2022.

Key recommendations include:

- Express appreciation to Governor Ricketts and the Legislature for recognizing the importance of broadband to Nebraska and for providing funding for broadband through the Nebraska Broadband Bridge grant program and the Remote Access Rural Broadband Grant program.
- Review the initial round of awards from the Broadband Bridge Grant Program to determine the impact of the program.
- Encourage local and regional broadband planning.

Commissioner Ridder moved to approve the findings and recommendations of the Public-Private Partnerships Subcommittee. Mr. Buker seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Ridder-Yes, Reiner-Yes, Hunnicutt-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Spray-Yes, Buker-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-8, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.

*Findings of the Broadband Technologies Subcommittee**

Ron Cone reported the findings of the Broadband Technologies Subcommittee. The subcommittee removed information on AirGig, a technology which was piloted by AT&T in 2019 and which has not been widely deployed. Information on Low Earth Orbit satellite service has been updated with information on Starlink's beta service. Starlink states that users during the initial beta service can expect speeds from 50 to 150 Mbps down and latency from 20 ms to 40 ms. Starlink requires a clear view of the sky to connect. During the beta period, users experience brief periods of no connectivity.

Mr. Shoemaker moved to approve the findings the Broadband Technologies Subcommittee. Mr. Buker seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Ridder-Yes, Reiner-Yes, Hunnicutt- Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Spray-Yes, Buker-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-8, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.

*Findings and Recommendations of the Homework Gap Subcommittee**

Mr. Buker shared the findings and recommendations of the Homework Gap Subcommittee. Those without broadband connectivity at home struggled to learn, access health care and work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Governor Ricketts, the Nebraska Department of Education, Educational Service Units, and local school districts coordinated federal funding to close the connectivity gap for students by purchasing computing devices, hot spots, and internet-enabled devices.

Federal funding also helped some libraries improve their broadband connections and start/expand hotspot lending programs. Libraries are key community partners in providing internet and computer access to students and the general public—especially in rural areas. However, just over half of Nebraska libraries serving communities with populations of less than 2,500 have internet access below 25 Mbps down and 3 Mbps up.

Increased support for low-income households is currently being provided through the FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit Program.

Key recommendations include:

- Encourage public libraries and schools without fiber connections to apply for support for new fiber construction from the E-Rate Special Construction matching fund program.
- Encourage school districts, ESUs, public libraries, and communities to implement programs such as Wi-Fi on buses, hotspot lending programs, low cost pay-by-the-month internet access, or alternative wireless deployments for student access on school-issued devices in order to reduce the number of unserved and underserved students.
- Encourage communities and regions to develop digital inclusion plans to address multi-generational needs.

Mr. Cone moved to approve the findings the Homework Gap Subcommittee. Mr. Shoemaker seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Ridder-Yes, Reiner-Yes, Hunnicutt-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Spray-Yes, Buker-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-8, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Shoemaker moved to adjourn. Mr. Shoemaker seconded. All were in favor. Motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:15 p.m.

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