

**RURAL BROADBAND TASK FORCE**  
Friday, June 23, 2023, 1:30-3:30 p.m. CT  
Varner Hall, Board Room--Lower Level  
3835 Holdrege Street, Lincoln, Nebraska  
**MINUTES**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Ed Toner, Nebraska Information Technology Commission  
Dan Watermeier, Nebraska Public Service Commission  
Senator Bruce Bostelman, Nebraska Legislature  
Senator Mike Moser, Nebraska Legislature  
Dave Dearmont, Nebraska Department of Economic Development  
Sherry Vinton, Nebraska Department of Agriculture  
Tom Shoemaker, Pinpoint Communications  
Andrew Whitney, Bryan Health  
Ron Cone, ESU  
Zachary Hunnicutt, Hunnicutt Farms  
Gwen Kautz, Dawson Public Power District

**MEMBERS ABSENT:**

Daniel Spray, Precision Technology  
Andrew Buker, University of Nebraska

**OPENING BUSINESS, ROLL CALL NOTICE OF POSTING OF AGENDA NOTICE OF NEBRASKA OPEN MEETINGS ACT POSTING, WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS OF NEW MEMBERS**

The meeting was called to order by Chair Ed Toner at 1:30. Ten members were present. A quorum existed to conduct official business. The meeting announcement was posted on the Nebraska Public Meeting and Rural Broadband Task Force websites on May 19, 2023. The agenda was posted on the Rural Broadband Task Force website on June 13, 2023. A copy of the Nebraska Open Meetings Act was available on the wall.

The following new members were introduced:

- Senator Mike Moser, Chair of the Transportation and Telecommunications Committee,
- Public Service Commission Commissioner Dan Watermeier,
- Dave Dearmont, Research Division Administrator for the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, and
- Sherry Vinton, Director of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture

Taskforce members member also introduced themselves.

**APPROVAL OF THE SEPTEMBER 13, 2022 MINUTES\***

Mr. Hunnicutt joined the meeting.

**Mr. Whitney moved to approve the September 13, 2022 minutes as presented. Mr. Watermeier seconded. Roll call vote: Toner-Yes, Watermeier-Yes, Dearmont-Yes, Vinton-Yes, Shoemaker-Yes, Kautz-Yes, Whitney-Yes, and Cone-Yes. Results: Yes-8, No-0, Abstained-0. Motion carried.**

Mr. Hunnicutt joined the meeting.

**UPDATES**

**LEGISLATIVE UPDATE**

Mike Hybl, Legal Counsel for the Transportation and Telecommunications Committee, provided the update. LB 683 consists of a number of bills related to infrastructure. The component bills of LB 683 consist of the following:

- 1) Original LB 683 - Establish the Nebraska Broadband Office
- 2) LB 412 (Moser) - Change provisions related to the Broadband Bridge Act
- 3) LB 359 (Hughes) - Change Broadband Bridge Act Application Deadline
- 4) LB 155 (DeBoer) - Change applicability of the Small Wireless Facilities Act
- 5) LB 122 (Bostelman) - Change provisions of the One-Call Notification Act
- 6) LB 722 (Bostelman) - Adopt the Rural Communications Sustainability Act
- 7) LB 124 (Moser) - Change provisions related to the County Bridge Match Program
- 8) LB 63 (Bostar) - Require withholding of support from the Universal Service Fund

**Sections 2, 3, 22, 23, 24, and 27 of Original LB 683.** Establishes the Nebraska Broadband Office, headed by the Director of Broadband. The Director of Broadband is to be appointed by the Governor and is subject to legislative confirmation. The Office is to be located within the Nebraska Department of Transportation (DOT) for administrative and budget purposes.

The duties of the Broadband Office are:

- 1) Engage in outreach and collaborate with all interested parties;
- 2) Develop a broadband strategic plan for the state;
- 3) Coordinate the broadband activity of all state entities that maximizes all public and private resources and encourages innovative models infrastructure ownership;
- 4) Coordinate state agencies on policy matters affecting the use of federal and state funding for broadband purposes;
- 5) Provide state advocacy of broadband issues on the federal level;
- 6) Ensure funding is utilized in a cost effective manner;
- 7) Oversee the coordination of programs for schools and libraries and digital inclusion and equity projects; and
- 8) Provide public information and resources.

The duty and responsibility for the Nebraska Broadband Map is transferred from the Public Service Commission to the Nebraska Broadband Office.

On or before December 1 of each year the Broadband Office shall file an annual status report with the Clerk of the Legislature and the Transportation and Telecommunications Committee shall hold a hearing on such report.

The Broadband Bridge Act Fund is amended. Currently the Fund shall consist of money appropriated by the Legislature and any federal funding designated for broadband purposes. This is revised to provide that the Governor may designate how federal funding for broadband purposes are to be administered.

## **BROADBAND OFFICE UPDATE**

Ms. Byers provided links to the press release on public input meetings. In addition, links to the NTIA: Three Takeaways from Version 2 of the FFC's National Broadband Map and the State Allocation Estimates from Broadband Analyst Mike Conrow, were provided for the mapping update.

Ms. Byers proceeded to share a Broadband Office update from Patrick Redmond:

- The Broadband Office has been engaged in a variety of activities to scale up the office following the passage of LB683, including work on the 5-yr plan required for BEAD with a consultant, Witt O'Brien. The Broadband Office anticipates being able to hit the deadline of August 12th.
- Outreach efforts have included 19 outreach sessions conducted by the Nebraska Public Service Commission and Office of the CIO prior to transferring the administration of the BEAD program to the Nebraska Broadband Office. Since the Broadband Office took on the outreach efforts, session have been held in McCook, Kearney, North Platte, and Broken Bow, with plans to go to South

Sioux City, Lincoln, and Omaha. There will also be a virtual option for the Lincoln and Omaha sessions.

- The Broadband Office's mapping effort is underway. A functional version of the map is available as a result of the contract signed with VETRO, but additional features such as data layers are being added. The map will be released publicly in the coming weeks, along with information on a proposed challenge process.

Finally, the Broadband Office is initiating the hiring process for various positions in the office and would direct any interested individuals to the [Broadband.Nebraska.gov](https://www.broadband.nebraska.gov) website to apply.

## **NEBRASKA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION UPDATE**

Cullen Robbins, Public Service Commission, provided the update.

**Broadband Bridge Grant Program.** The Public Service Commission has completed two rounds of Broadband Bridge grant funding. Broadband Bridge round three is set up to receive applications for funding. The deadline for applications was moved to July 11, thanks to the flexibility in adjusting the due date granted through LB 683. Grants are expected to be awarded in late December or early January.

**Capital Projects Funds Grant Program.** The Public Service Commission expects to announce Capital Projects Funds grant awards on Tuesday, June 27, 2023. Awards have to be split between US Congressional Districts 1 and 3 per state statute. The PSC has entered into an agreement with the DED to administer the funding. The Public Service Commission received 130 applications. Requests in Congressional District 1 were for \$183 million in grant funding. Requests in Congressional District 3 were for \$49.2 million in grant funding. In Congressional District 1, all of the funding is expected to be used. In Congressional District 3, another grant round to use all of the available funding is expected.

**E-Rate Special Construction.** The PSC has an open docket in NUSF-117, the E-Rate Special Construction program. The PSC has received comments and reply comments, and will set a date for a hearing. The docket looks at whether modifications should be made to the program to expand what can be supported through the program, among other potential changes.

**Telehealth.** PSC has scheduled a workshop for July 12<sup>th</sup> to discuss the TeleHealth program.

**Reverse Auction.** PSC conducted a reverse auction last year, but participation was minimal. PSC has an open proceeding looking at changes to the reverse auction mechanism, including ways to improve participation.

## **NITC/OCIO DIGITAL EQUITY PLANNING GRANT UPDATE**

Ms. Byers reviewed the Nebraska Connectively and Device Gap document in the meeting materials. She discussed that as more applications are moving online and especially to mobile applications, having both mobile and home access is becoming necessary to fully participate in the digital economy and society. While only ten percent of Nebraska households have no internet access, nearly one-third of Nebraska households have no internet connectivity or only have mobile or home internet access. The figures for access in rural Nebraska counties is higher, with 13.5% of rural households having no internet access and over 40% having no access or only mobile or home internet. The meeting materials included an update on planning activities.

## **REVIEW 2021 RECOMMENDATIONS AND METRICS**

In late 2021, the Task Force submitted its 2021 report to the Legislature. The report's recommendations and metrics were sent as part of the meeting materials for the members' review.

## **2023 WORK PLAN**

**The** Task Force is required to submit a report to the Legislature by November 1, 2023. There are three other broadband related plans being developed:

- The Nebraska Broadband Office is working with a contractor to develop a 5-Year Broadband Deployment Plan as one of the requirements of the BEAD program.
- The Nebraska Broadband office is developing a strategic broadband plan as required by LB 683.
- The NITC/OCIO is developing a State Digital Equity Plan.

Mr. Toner recommended that the task force use material from these other reports as much as possible so the task force is not duplicating efforts. Also, with Anne Byers working on the State Digital Equity Planning Grant, the task force has limited staff resources. In the past the task force has had subcommittees on the Nebraska Universal Service Fund, broadband mapping, broadband technologies, the homework gap, and agriculture, and public-private partnerships. Mr. Toner recommend paring down the number of subcommittees and only having the subcommittees meet once or twice.

Discussion followed regarding coordination among the groups working on broadband in Nebraska. Mr. Toner is encouraging the groups to collaborate and not duplicate efforts. Coordination with the Broadband Office will be easier when the Broadband Director has been announced and is on board. The group also discussed forming a subcommittee on the future of the task force.

After discussion and by group consensus, it was decided to keep subcommittees on NUSF, agriculture, and public-private partnerships. The following members volunteered to serve on the committees: NUSF: Tom Shoemaker, Dan Watermeier, and Andrew Whitney

- Agriculture: Zach Hunnicutt and Sherry Vinton
- Public-Private Partnerships: Tom Shoemaker, Gwen Kautz, Ron Cone, and Senator Bruce Bostelman.

Dan Spray was on the NUSF and Agriculture Subcommittees and was not present at the meeting. Ms. Byers will reach out to him to see if he would like to serve on those subcommittees again.

The Task Force will likely need to meet in September to review the recommendations and report to the Legislature. Depending on the progress of the report, the Task Force may need to meet in October.

Ms. Byers will reach out to members regarding the subcommittee meetings.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

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

The meeting was adjourned at 2:42 p.m.

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