Public Works Department
City of Bellingham

Broadband Advisory Workgroup
Meeting Notes
Tuesday, August 3, 2021
6:00pm – 7:45PM
Zoom

Workgroup Members in attendance:	Linda Fels Michelle Kopcha Milissa Miller	Spencer Moore Steve Spitzer RB Tewksbury
Ex Officio Members in attendance:	Atul Deshmane Terry Davis David Brinn	Kurt Gazow
City Staff and Facilitator in attendance:	Eric Johnston, Public Works Director Marty Mulholland, IT Director Rush Duncan, Public Works Webinar Support David Roberts, Peak Sustainability Group, Facilitator Rebecca Judd & Jonathan McConnel, City of Bellingham Library	

1. Welcome & Approval of Notes

    David Roberts started the meeting at 6:00pm. Notes from July 6 meeting are approved.

2. Administrative & Technology Items Update / RFP Update

    Marty Mulholland notes than an accidental fiber cut on July 15 significantly tested our failover capacity – 10G to 1G service – it was an exciting moment and we successfully passed. If you picture the fiber network as a spiderweb, if you cut a path, there is a design in place for data communications to reach core sites successfully – there was a limited disruption, but all systems were able to access their systems.

    Eric Johnston: consultant update is going well – we are waiting on draft scope of work proposal, business licenses, and tax forms. Of key importance is a non-disclosure agreement to provide as much information as we can while preserving our security. We expect to see progress in the next few days.

    The City Council has been notified that we are in the process of making our final selection. Kristopher made an excellent presentation to the City Council.

    WA State of Commerce has a call for broadband-related projects. Participated in webinar on how to apply and having internal discussions – we are deciding on the value of starting the application process.

    Infrastructure package coming out of Washington D.C. will certainly include broadband – key to funding is to provide opportunities to leverage and partner government with private entities. It is a requirement to engage with private ISPs, tying municipalities with private government. Money is first going to underserved communities. We are monitoring as opportunities develop.

Terry Davis: notes that the speed factors make Bellingham considered to NOT be an underserved community (150 MB for speed).

Eric: Application process for state does have a definition for affordability, it notes that the rates must be similar to other rates in the state of Washington. Funds are administered through the Public Works Board through the Department of Funding.

3. Speakers: Bellingham Public Library	Rebecca Judd (Director) & Jonathan McConnel (Head of Digital Services) *[Rebecca showed a PowerPoint presentation which will be uploaded to the COB website]* Questions: Terry Davis: does the program allow you to purchase connections as well as laptops for individuals? We have offered our internet essentials program for a home connection, will provide more info. ECF is the 7.1 that was made available from the FCC – you can purchase a connection, you provide the customer with a code, and then they use the code to redeem a 50 MB connection at home with us. Terry Davis and Rebecca Judd will connect via Marty Mulholland to exchange information. Spencer Moore: for Terry, what other hardware services does Comcast provide? Terry: Internet Essentials, our starting point for digital equity – low income criteria are based on SNAP, food stamps, if you are in the federal assistance programs. We also offer partnership agreements like the Bellingham Public School System. We've recently done EBB that applies to any of our services. The ECF is a service for libraries and schools to provide internet service at home. Those are the main ones we focus on from a digital equity standpoint. Spencer Moore: for Rebecca, do you think these programs are going to grow in the future? COVID is a flashpoint for philosophical equity questions – do you think this will grow over time or is there a plan for further development? Rebecca: the spotlight for digital equity is probably here to stay as it is part of our everyday world – you can't function in our society without access. For the library, our long game is digital skill building – public access computing, tech coaching, and digital skill building – that will always be there. The digital hotspot program is a transitional thing for, say, housing. We will have to find over time what the setpoint is – I conceptualize the service as best for short term needs, really only for people who are testing, or moving, or transitioning – we will have to find out what the right number is. Atul: for Rebecca, do you have thoughts on a definition for Equity? Rebecca: in terms of defining equity – the pieces that are so important are – do people have access, the skills they need, devices, knowledge – how are we being intentional about reaching out to the disadvantaged. Atul: different people have different needs for connectivity, the handicapped or vision impaired may need 3rd party translation services which are bandwidth

intensive. Rebecca: that idea of meeting people where they are at and reducing barriers are important across the board.

Marty: will any of these funding streams support training programs the library offers? Jonathon: the coaching platform comes out of Minnesota and provides very basic tech skills. Some Goodwills in the state (not Bellingham) have been using it, the curriculum has been proven and seems helpful. The level of skills they are targeting are where instructor-led outcomes will be best for people. All libraries in the state had the opportunity to get access and other organizations to get access – instructors can get access through the back end to get info on participant's progress in the program. Rebecca: we have had a robust tech coaching volunteer system, we were able to draw on volunteers for tech coaching, as well as reaching out to community colleges to, say, have students in the IT programs participate in coaching – these are possible ways to expand.

Milissa: is anything holding the library back from providing services? Rebecca: some of the hotspot funding is expensive, we try to advocate to reduce the cost of monthly service for schools and libraries – that is a barrier for us – if it was a more reasonable monthly cost we could provide more service. Jonathon: we have devices on different carriers, there are some holes where good access is not provided in particular locations.

Milissa: can Comcast also provide those same services and help the library without having to have the devices? Terry Davis: that is where Internet Essentials is better than a hotspot – it's not the library issuing it, but it is a voucher system – 50 MB service level. Jonathon: Bellingham library is not eligible for service through the ECF – our board has a policy of not filtering public internet access – meaning we are ineligible for meeting the demands of the Child Internet Protection Act – all of the computers would have to be filtered at the library if we are to provide internet service of any kind through the ECF. We would be eligible to purchase equipment that we can get reimbursed for but wouldn't be able to pay for the service, and when we lend it we would have to keep records for 10 years.

Terry: there are internet control devices, for parents for example, in the ECF – I don't see where that would limit you, we should discuss outside of this meeting. Hotspots should be no different than Internet Essentials.

Jonathon: it's related to the CIPA law that was passed by Congress, Internet Essentials is a great program. It is a local limitation – our board policy prevents us from filtering internet.

Michelle: is your Reconnect program specific to Bellingham? (Rebecca: yes) is there any comparable program for the Whatcom system? Rebecca: not that we are aware of.

Steve: When we talk about digital equity, I assume we are not just talking about underserved with economic hardships, but also those with obstacles like disabilities, or seniors. Rebecca: yes, regardless of age, income, means, or abilities – reducing the barriers any way we can.

Steve: the monthly cost from current ISPs is an obstacle? Rebecca: one obstacle is the high cost of the monthly service for our hotspot lending program from one of our carriers.

Atul: regarding the physical facilities, they are all connected by fiber, do you have any bandwidth issues? Jonathon: no – we have not had any issues with bandwidth at any of our locations. Eric: they are on the City's fiber network.

4. Definitions discussion of:
    - Equity

David: we have addressed all definitions in previous meetings except "Equity."

[David updates a Word document with track changes for the discussion]

Atul: I participated in legislative action, Mia Gregerson ran a task force on digital equity and inclusion – in those bills, with broad support, they have a definition, but they do not specify a speed – they refer to the services and capacities. I'm proposing that as a topic of discussion today.

[David pulls up NDIA website at www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions and shares his screen; definition is copied below, also added to Word document with track changes]

Digital Equity is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

[see Word Document for final definition, see recording of meeting for back-and-forth discussion of wording in the definition]

David will email the definitions to the Broadband Advisory Workgroup for review.

5. Items for next meeting

For the meeting September 7th
- We do not yet know if the meeting will be in-person or over Zoom. We will know more after the August 30th Council Meeting. We anticipate meeting over Zoom at this point. Questions or concerns may be directed to Eric Johnston separately if you prefer. Please let David know if you have feedback to improve the meetings.
- Eric: we will be posting resources from tonight's meeting to the Broadband Advisory Group resources page.
- Steve: what about the timeline for the completion of our group? Eric: the consultant was confident about getting the work done aggressively in a timely fashion – we may go past December. We may do another presentation to Council in November and request more time if desired. This group is doing a great job with respectful, impassioned, informed conversation and is exactly what we need. We appreciate your willingness to participate.

- Eric: I suggest we start to include time on our agenda to meet with the consultant. I would like to invite a representative from the City of Mt. Vernon to present (the group agrees). Terry Davis: we would be willing to present to the group, perhaps a joint ISP session to be able to identify and discuss key items.
- David: if the focus is on the consultant, do we need a planning team? (group says it is not necessary) ok, but think about what you want to talk about with the consultant. We have things to share (our definitions) and a scope of work to discuss.

Meeting adjourned at 7:58 pm

Next meeting scheduled for Tuesday, September 7th at 6:00pm via Zoom or possibly in person at the Fairhaven Library (Fireplace Room)