

Telecommunications Issues for the 2014 Legislative Session: VTA Executive Summary for House Commerce Committee Hearing December 5, 2014

Calendar year 2014 is a “pivot” year in telecommunications policy for the state, a time both to look backward at progress made toward achieving the year 2013 broadband and cellular objectives established by the legislature and Governor and to look forward to the future telecommunications needs of the state. Reporting and oversight should be a significant part of the Committee’s role in this session. Although there are only limited issues on which legislative action absolutely must be taken in 2014, the 2013 statutory goal makes this a good year to consider the state’s trajectory.

On broadband, substantial progress has been made, with many new addresses served, and all unserved addresses matched with funded projects (except for a small number of addresses which may emerge as “unserved” from data collected at the the end of 2013). These are being addresses through a variety of means, both VTA-funded and not. The Committee may wish to hear about the status of these projects.

On access to mobile services, significant work has been started to expand service, although the results remain much more of a work in progress, and most projects are at an earlier stage. VTA has developed a portfolio approach, including grants and infrastructure development, traditional towers and small cells, large carriers and small. It will be important for the Committee to hear about the life-cycle of these projects, as the progress is less obvious to the casual observer, and the projects have been slower to mature. The Committee should also hear about important work being funded directly by cellular companies. The role of the “Section 248a” permitting process should be taken up by the Committee, especially as this provision will sunset in 2014 under current law.

Fiber optic infrastructure supports both cellular and broadband projects. The end of 2013 will see the completion of the large stimulus-funded fiber project, Vermont Fiber Connect. This milestone provides an opportunity to look back at the implementation of that project. There are a number of new open-access “dark fiber” projects that the VTA has funded or facilitated being completed in 2013 or 2014, which should also provide an opportunity to compare the two models of fiber infrastructure development.

The Committee may wish to review projects in which state dollars have assisted in obtaining federal grants. The largest of these is the Vermont Fiber Connect project, but new this year are an EDA-funded Cellular Resiliency project funded in areas hit by Irene and other 2011 flooding, as well as the Northern Borders Regional Commission’s award to help fund Northeast Kingdom dark fiber.

It will be timely during the upcoming session to consider future telecommunications needs for the state in a post-stimulus era. Some projects from the current wave of funding are still being developed, meaning that final decisions on future state efforts are not essential this year. However, this is a good year to consider what has worked well, what could be improved, what gaps remain, and from which sources investment for future telecommunications needs of the state may come.