

Comments to the House Energy and Technology Committee 31 January 2019

My name is David Stoner. I live in Orleans County in the town of Craftsbury. Craftsbury has a population of 1,300 and a diverse economic foundation based on education, recreation, and agriculture. We are one of the few growing communities in the NEK as evidenced by the fact that our toddler day care and our elementary school are both bursting at the seams.

I am retired from gainful employment, but I still manage a woodlot in Greensboro, and I serve as a volunteer in several capacities. I would like to share with you two of those volunteer activities that I believe are important for the future of the North East Kingdom.

The first is the Craftsbury Broadband Project. About 20 years ago, a group of Craftsbury residents looked to the future and concluded that the existence of our rural community would be severely threatened if we did not find a way to attract high speed internet service. We explored all service providers at that time and worked with several fixed wireless providers to bring service to town. We learned that our topography prevents sufficient consistent wireless coverage to satisfy the needs of the community.

When the work of the Vermont Council on Rural Development came to Craftsbury, the town voted improved broadband and cell service as one of three community priorities. We continued with our education on what is possible and determined that a fiber network was necessary in the future for both businesses and residents.

When the State built its fiber line from Hardwick to Newport, the line was built in Craftsbury to pass through two of our three village Centers. So, it became obvious to us that we needed to build a fiber optic network that utilized the State fiber.

We were fortunate to obtain business development grants from the US Department of Agriculture Rural Development and the Northern Borders Regional Commission to use the State fiber and extend it to cover the majority of businesses in town. In order to complete the initial network design, Kingdom Fiber applied for and received a State Connectivity Grant to provide service to an unserved section of the network plan.

The Town subsidized connections for to up to 25 businesses. We had several significant in-kind technical contributions and we now have 13 aerial miles of fiber and ½ mile underground that connects the town network to the State fiber. The project covers the majority of businesses in town and we are able to reach half of the residences with fiber. Our Selectboard conducted competitive bidding and selected Kingdom fiber to be our Internet service provider.

Our project has met many delays – the longest were getting the utilities to complete their work so we could obtain the permits to hang the fiber. There were also problems with sections of the state fiber that were not properly built and the need for the State to complete access points so the town network could connect to the state fiber. Our patience and perseverance has paid off as now we are ready to start connecting businesses and residences to the fiber network.

The second volunteer activity stems from my appointment by the Northeastern Vermont Development Authority to the Northern Enterprises Board, a non-profit organization. NE had two major assignments,

managing the Food Venture Center and the 55 miles of dark fiber known as Northlink. The Food Venture Center was successfully transferred to the Center for an Agricultural Economy in Hardwick. The primary user of the Northlink fiber is the Vermont Electric Coop, who also maintains the fiber. NE has no operational staff but the network was successfully managed by the Vermont Telecommunications Authority until the VTA was dissolved a couple of years ago. This fiber network was built 12-15 years ago by a State and Federal partnership. We have leased fiber to the Vermont Telephone Company and exchanged fiber lines with both the State Department of Public Service and the State Department of Transportation.

We have had a long-standing issue with the phone company on the placement of the fiber lines in the utility space on the poles. This issue has been resolved to the satisfaction of the Public Utilities Commission. Now we have a very viable network of dark fiber in the NEK that is available for providing service to this rural part of our State. We are convinced that the establishment of a viable broadband network in the rural areas of the State is necessary if the small rural communities are to survive. We believe that these communities are valuable to the economic life of the young people, to our tourism industry, and to the very culture of Vermont.

You have a very exciting task before you and I look forward to your guidance in building a modern and efficient internet service in our state.

Thank you for your time.