

Proposed testimony to the Senate and House Appropriations Committee
Friday, August 28 , 2020
Christine Hallquist speaking on behalf of NEK Broadband

NEK Community Broadband (www.nekbroadband.org) is a Communications Union District (CUD) consisting of 31 towns in Northern Vermont working to provide every E911 business and residential address in the with access to a minimum speed of 100 Mbps, symmetrical at an affordable price.

With the current grant programs, we have discovered that the information on cable locations in the mapping data given to the state is sometimes not accurate. While this is understandable, it has hampered our efforts due to the tight time constraints. It is going to require residents to actually do a ride-out to confirm the distances. Many, if not most, do not have the technical background to do this. NEK CUD could help with this, however we need much more time to address every request. The other problem is that the providers (Spectrum, Comcast and Charter) do not have the urgency, support, or policies that support his program. In one case, when calling Spectrum, the construction/engineering stated they do not offer quotes beyond 2500' of access point. That said, we could use another six months to effectively deploy LECAP funds.

At this point NEK Broadband does not anticipate losing many addresses as a result of LECAP as we are discovering not many residents are able to take advantage of the program.

Right now the program is directed to residents. In the town of Kirby, there are not any addresses that can take advantage of the LECAP. The town itself would like to use the money for the town hall to create a hot spot to enable community members to have access. Currently the legislation does not have a provision for this. There may be other communities who want to access LECAP funds to create community hot spots and NEK Broadband would like to see language to enable this.

We also should make sure the proposed \$2 million appropriation from the governor for telecommunications is directed to the CUD's. This will enable NEK Broadband to do the necessary per-engineering work for a construction. As part of this per-engineering work, NEK Broadband is looking to develop agreements with the state and utilities to collaborate in the use of existing, as well as future fiber assets. By building a more reliable data network, the network will enable more reliable communications to achieve the goals of the Comprehensive Energy Plan, as well as improved communications during crisis. NEK Broadband will be looking to use Indefeasible Rights of Use as the method to create these partnerships.

NEK Broadband is also going to be looking for the state of Vermont to create a public database of the poles and wires assets throughout the state and to put the necessary mechanisms in place for that database to be updated as the electric and telecommunications utilizes update their databases.

NEK Broadband is currently working on cataloging the existing telecommunication assets in the area in order to identify places where wireless infrastructure can be quickly deployed to serve as many priority addresses as possible. Additional funds would enable NEK Broadband to deploy additional installations to serve more priority addresses.

In the future, state grant money directed towards improving telecommunications infrastructure should be directed through the CUD. The CUD's will partner with incumbent providers where appropriate. It is important that the CUD's maintain some of the higher density areas that might otherwise be selectively served by the incumbent telecommunications providers. As these more profitable locations are taken away, the business case becomes increasingly difficult. NEK Broadband serves some of the areas of least density. As a whole NEK Broadband territory is among the most economically challenged, especially when you consider energy burden.

In terms of providing more funds in the current year (2020), it would be challenging to identify projects and deploy them in the time period remaining.