

Why Was LFCUD Created?

For the record, I am Jane Campbell, the Morrystown representative on the Lamoille FiberNet Communications Union District, which was launched in mid-July of 2020, and which we refer to as the LFCUD. We began with the five towns of Cambridge, Hyde Park, Johnson, Morrystown, and Waterville, then added Belvidere and Eden soon after.

Today I am testifying in support of the \$2 million that Governor Scott has proposed to support the Communication Union Districts.

If you wonder why the LFCUD was created, you only need to look at the Public Service Department map of available 25/3 broadband speeds in our region. On the map, you can see that there is no coverage at all in three of our towns and also no coverage about half the geographic area in each of the other towns.

We are the towns you've heard about where there is tremendous inequity, with some schoolchildren needing to find someone to drive them to a hot spot to do their schoolwork during the pandemic, where people needing telehealth services or people working at home, including those teaching online, found that their broadband was woefully inadequate.

We are grateful that the legislature and the governor have recognized there is an urgent need for expanded and improved broadband, even beyond the pandemic period.

I can share many personal anecdotes about buying extra equipment to try and boost our internet reliability, needing to move around our house while on Zoom to try and get a more stable connection, and trying to work at home while our daughter needed to attend online classes last spring,. Typically, it worked best if we turned off all devices in the house but one, and even then, we found that our connection was often unstable — and we pay for speeds of 25/3. In the past, we used a wireless service for our internet but wireless simply doesn't work in our area. Even for phone service, we continue to pay for a landline in addition to having cell phone service because cell service is so poor here.

Though we understand that some people feel an investment in wireless can help in the short-term, it's our view that wireless is a rather outdated technology, and the wireless systems we build today will need to be replaced with fiber in the very near future for Vermont to ensure our economic development and sustainability.

What Is the LFCUD Doing?

The LFCUD governing board holds the perfect mix of expertise in the areas of technology and education, finance, fundraising, marketing, administration and policy.

I'm pleased to say that even though our CUD is only a little more than a month old, we have already accomplished quite a bit:

- We started by securing a Green Mountain Fund grant for some of our start-up costs. We received this grant before the VT Community Foundation grants and the Connected Community Resilience Grant funding that came out of the Covid-Relief funds.

- We have established bylaws, drafted financial policies & procedures and job descriptions, and mission statement and are applying for liability and Directors & Officers insurance.
- We also participate in the regular meetings of the VT Association of CUDs, to advance our knowledge and to explore potential collaborations and knowledge-sharing on an ongoing basis.
- We have begun creating a website, and our technology committee is evaluating the technologies that can help the CUD deliver high speed and reliable broadband service to all residents and businesses, and also the advantages and disadvantages of interconnecting LFCUD broadband infrastructure with the existing or future broadband infrastructure of neighboring regions.

Our next steps are to:

- use the results of a study commissioned by the Lamoille Regional Planning Commission to determine the priority areas for our first system buildouts. In building a broadband system, it's more cost efficient to first build in the areas with the highest density. Any delay in building the first areas then delays the buildout overall.
- Issue a contract to conduct utility pole data assessment this fall, either in a collaborative effort or individually — as we understand it, the VT Dept. of Public Service is exploring the possibility of a statewide effort, with funding for that would be separate from the \$2 million. The pole collection data is the essential next step for all the CUDs we've been communicating with, and we support the efforts toward compiling a statewide database of poles that utilities would keep updated.
- secure the match funding needed for the \$4M VEDA loan.
- Issue a contract to design the system buildout this winter.
- Issue a contract to begin our buildout in spring 2021.

The most difficult part of this plan will be raising the funds for the VEDA match. We all know that the broadband situation needs immediate action, and we see this \$2M as essential to making it possible for CUDs to get their efforts off the ground as soon as possible.

This \$2M investment is the key that can unlock that door to VEDA funding, and it will mean the difference between truly changing our broadband landscape in the very near future or enduring the system we have and putting off changes into the more distant future.

Looking Ahead

In closing, on behalf of the Lamoille FiberNet Communications Union District and the many people in homes and businesses who will be served by our CUD's expansion of broadband, we thank the legislature for their support of these focused regional efforts.

We think it was a wise move for the state to invest in the CUDs. Though CUDs can partner with service providers in their region as needed, the CUDs have missions that are focused on serving their communities, including those residences and businesses in the less dense, harder to reach areas, i.e., the areas that for-profit providers are less likely to serve.

Respectfully submitted, Jane Campbell, Lamoille FiberNet Communications Union District board member