



February 17, 2021

To: House Committee on Energy & Technology

From: David Snedeker, Executive Director, NVDA
Regional Development Corporations of Vermont

Re: Communications; broadband deployment; CUDs; VT Community Broadband Authority

Chair Briglin and Committee Members:

My name is David Snedeker, Executive Director of the Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA) – a joint regional development corporation and regional planning commission serving the communities and businesses of Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans Counties (the Northeast Kingdom). I am also a member of the VT Telecommunications & Connectivity Advisory Board, but my purpose here today is to represent the Regional Development Corporations of VT (RDCs) and their partner regional planning commissions.

The Regional Development Corporations of VT have a particular focus of assisting the business community of VT, working together with state and local partners to help ensure their growth and success. Crucial to the RDCs mission of assisting the business community is having the appropriate economic programs and basic infrastructure in place that allow VT businesses to compete equally statewide and with other regions of the country. In this current COVID-19 environment, the lack of basic high-speed broadband infrastructure, especially in rural underserved areas has made our mission to assist businesses exceedingly difficult. We acknowledge that this heightened truth applies to other sectors as well – i.e., education, human services, etc.

Prior to the pandemic and following the authorization by the VT Legislature that allowed communities to jointly form municipal districts – Communications Union Districts (CUD) – to tackle the issue of broadband access locally, RDCs and RPCs began their efforts to aid municipalities. In the Northeast Kingdom, multiple towns approached NVDA with their idea to form a regional CUD. Without having their own ‘official’ status to accept funds and apply for funding to assist this effort, NVDA was able to help in the following ways:

- 1) In July 2019, NVDA with the Lamoille County Planning Commission (LCPC) and Lamoille Economic Development Corporation (LEDC), applied for and received \$66,000 in funding from USDA’s Rural Business Opportunity Grant program (along with \$23,000 in local match) to conduct pre-feasibility work to activate local communities in four counties and begin the work that was needed to form a regional CUD(s). Activities included surveys, committee formations,

analyses of existing assets, establishing local goals, evaluating funding options, and completing the legal documents required of a CUD.

- 2) In June 2020, NVDA applied for and received a \$60,000 VT Broadband Innovation Grant (BIG) that allowed the CUD to begin in-depth feasibility and business plan development under the oversight of the VT Public Service Dept.
- 3) In October 2020, NVDA received a second \$66,000 USDA Rural Business Development Grant to augment the work funded by the state and allow the completion of the Phase 1 and 2 Feasibility and Business Plans that readied the CUD for participation in the federal RDOF (Rural Digital Opportunity Fund) auction. Part of this grant award allowed NVDA to contract with an Administrator to assist the CUD (NEK Community Broadband) with their day-to-day operations.

Statewide, RDC and RPC assistance has varied dependent upon local requests and readiness. The RDCs and RPCs have assisted with identifying funding opportunities, including offers to serve as grant applicants or fiscal agents. Others have hosted information forums, assisted with CUD organizing efforts, provided help with website development, or offered connections to state and federal resources. As a network of twelve RDCs and eleven RPCs operating statewide, our regional entities remain ready to assist any CUDs – existing or fledgling.

- The RDCs and RPCs support the goal of universal high-speed broadband as identified by the VT Telecommunications Plan.
- Given that VT is a small state with limited resources, we also support public-private partnerships that would include the State of Vermont, Communications Union Districts, and the private sector providers. This support would include making funding resources available to *all* partners, both public and private.
- In the Committee bill (draft 2.1) dated 2/10/21, we note the creation of the Vermont Community Broadband Authority. Our only concern regarding this provision of the proposed legislation is that given the seemingly tight deadlines to apply for or utilize any new funding, waiting for a new or provisional board to be created may cause some difficulties in applying for funding.
- The RDCs and RPCs understand that many of the CUDs are very new and with limited resources. We support funding that would help them to organize and set them on a path for sustainability over the long term, which may include opportunities for early seed-funding. Ideally, funding for the CUDs would prioritize broadband build-out initiatives such as make-ready work, obtaining utility easements, etc.
- Additionally, there is still a need to support the many VT communities that are not part of a CUD. While the regional commissions have been able to apply for and receive competitive grants to assist communities, success is not guaranteed. The RPCs request \$275,000 in funding to be used statewide to support communities with broadband planning and implementation.

In closing, the RDCs and RPCs and many of you know that universal broadband has been the goal of this and many previous administrations. Given the challenges we have seen with the pandemic and the opportunities we now see with federal funding, we believe it is time to focus and tackle a longstanding problem in all of Vermont. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted by,

David Snedeker
Executive Director, NVDA
Regional Development Corporations of VT
VT Association of Planning and Development Agencies