

Comments on Draft 21-0185 Accelerated Community Broadband Deployment Bill
Prepared by David Healy, Town of Calais, CVFiber Delegate
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I congratulate the committee on drafting a comprehensive bill that focuses state efforts and resources to reach the single goal of broadband to all of rural Vermont. I represent the Town of Calais on the CVFiber Board. I am the Chair of CVFiber's Planning and Development Committee. We have spent two plus years planning to build our highspeed broadband network to all premises in the District. These comments and suggestions are mine and do not represent CVFiber.

What are the lessons from this experience that I believe can be addressed in this bill?

The success of the CUD model depends on knowledgeable and talented volunteers with administrative support. I believe that we have done good work. However, people do not want to wait for service. They want it now. I am attaching the results of our most recent survey to provide you information of the need. CVFiber's experience with the COVID relief funding for CUD's was a terrific help, however the length of time it took for the state's COVID oversight firm and the PSD's grant program shortened any time to have done real productive work. To a certain degree it resulted in many wasted hours of volunteer time. It is important that the State not encumber CUD's efforts to bring highspeed broadband to the rural communities. The PSD is a multi-focused regulatory focused organization with limited resources for what the state is attempting to do. Their long-term relationship with the incumbents sometimes makes CUDs suspicious of their motivations. Some of the funding provided last year impacts has impacted our buildout.

From my viewpoint, creating the Vermont Community Broadband Authority (VCBA) is the only sound way to see that the universal highspeed broadband goal to ever be achieved in Vermont. Critical to its success is to have the mandate to deliver and not to impede CUDs and its partners success. We need a "Marshall Plan" to get broadband to every location in Vermont. Nothing less than a laser-focused organization with aggressive leadership is acceptable. We cannot succeed with historic approaches.

Vermont Community Broadband Authority Organization

As revised, the Interim Board in the proposed VCBA is right sized. The Permanent Board as proposed is too large to be truly effective. The ideal size would be 7 to 9 members. I believe the Chair should be led by the Secretary of Commerce and Community Development rather than the Commissioner of Public Service. I believe that rural broadband is purely an economic and human resources (education, telehealth, and remote work) need and should not be led by someone whose main roles is as a regulator. I believe linking it to the Department of Public Service's other regulatory functions will hinder VCBA from meeting its responsibilities.

The staffing as proposed is insufficient. For an organization that is to oversee a \$300 to \$600 million investment it needs a commensurate team of competent employees. In the State of Maine, the staffing for their Broadband Authority comes from their Department of Economic and Community Development. It will require dedicated people to support CUDs—finance,

planning, grant writing, data management, software tools, etc. In addition, the Executive Director will need an administrative assistant. The Director will also need to lead the state's liaison with our Congressional delegation. Some of these functions might be able to be accomplished in both in the Authority and ACCD. The GIS resources in ACCD could take on the E-911 broadband service level.

Essential VCBA Functions (not a complete list)

The following are my recommendations:

Leadership

- An accountable champion to lead Vermont Broadband Marshall Plan.
- Sets Priorities
- Stay abreast of national, regional trends
- Liaison with our Congressional delegation.

Technical (both support and policy):

- Standards developed that all CUDs and Partnerships follow.
- Design and data standards for operations and design
- Planning that is continuously updated
- Operational standards
- Tracking system for measuring progress (Rural Broadband Dashboard)

Financial:

- Grant Making Funding using a Block Grant Model
- Revolving Loan Establishment
- CUD Administrative & Operational Support
- Audits
- Reporting

Minimize Duplication of Efforts

It is not productive to have each CUD develop RFPs for Pole Inventories; Make Ready support; design, engineering, and construction. This can be developed as a statewide initiative.

This means providing critical standards and both financial and technical support for CUDs. I would highly recommend that funding formula be developed that serves all who do not have a minimum of 100/100 service. It would be helpful to require each CUD to report electronically their progress through an interactive website that contains live updates of connections and fiber runs. Communities, businesses, and individual need to see real progress.

Working with WEC and GMP will speed up everyone getting highspeed broadband. Financing the system is critical. Partnering with WEC will enable CVFiber to build out everywhere in less than 4 years. We will take 8 years without the partnership. Your support for removing the property tax burden for new fiber is critical to their repayment of their note.

As for the timing of the Authority, it may take a year to get up and running. In the interim, the PSD can could administer the program and start developing the procedures that the board will need. These should be developed from the basis of the goals outlined in the bill, not a rehash of line extensions.

Regarding the Administration's proposal to create "Broadband Infrastructure Fund" misses the need. We do not need an incubator. We need a program that guides and develops highspeed broadband to everyone in Vermont.

Your approach is preferable to the Administration's proposal using the Clean Energy Development Fund model proposed by the Commissioner. We are not trying to evolve and support technology change that is what the CEDF was created to do. It would be a misguided band aid solution to meeting the Marshall Plan I have described.

Connectivity Initiatives

Spending money for line extensions is not the same as investing in highspeed broadband. All funding should be cut off in the next year. Fixed wireless is really the only short-term solution (six months) to meet the current emergency needs. They can serve multiple families in need instead of one-offline extensions.

Thank you for your consideration of my comments and suggestions.

Sincerely yours,

David Healy
Calais Delegate, CVFiber