



Stephen Whitaker <whitaker.stephen@gmail.com>

Sam I Am ... or How to right the distorted course of Vermont's Fiber Strategy

1 message

Stephen Whitaker <whitaker.stephen@gmail.com>
To: Stephen Whitaker <whitaker.stephen@gmail.com>

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Governor Phil Scott
and
Transportation Secretary Joe Flynn
and
Public Safety Commissioner Michael Schirling
and
To The Editor:

The attached National Weather Service screenshot, dated Sunday, is clearly illustrating that Hurricane Sam should give us all pause, and motivation.

But not too long a pause - before we get busy mapping fiber resiliency strategies, planning rapid restoral plans, inventorying generators and those radio and fiber sites unprotected by generators, underground emergency radio backhaul options and most importantly, immediately engaging in the new broadband fiber build planning to assure that integrated planning, maximum redundancy, resiliency and public safety grade hardening is being done now in a coordinated manner!

This integrated planning will not happen if, as the Vermont

Community Broadband Board (VCBB) is erroneously being led to believe, that hiring an engineering contractor to complete a statewide engineered, resilient fiber design will unnecessarily or unacceptably delay the CUDs' aspirations to build fiber during the next construction season in 2022.

Only by having an independent engineering firm ascertain the locations, best use and capacity of all available fiber already built with public and ratepayer subsidies, including FirstLight, Consolidated, VTA/PSD, Velco, GMP, WEC, VTRANS, and others, will we be able to design the most resilient and repairable, but also the most cost effective strategy for the CUDs to pursue.

Use of all this existing fiber to deploy interim fixed wireless and to in-fill cellular dead zones with an all-carriers, neutral host operator to meet today's urgent public safety and broadband needs during the years that it will take to build out all the statewide fiber would be an additional benefit of a statewide design.

Similarly, despite the eagerness of CUDs to own something, anything, NO state owned fiber should be allowed to be transferred in ownership to the un-staffed or understaffed CUDs until this resiliency design is completed as well as statewide, regionally focused rapid repair protocols and plans, and the proven availability of qualified repair contractors reviewed and approved by the Public Utility Commission.

The unique fiber needs for statewide resiliency, urgent mobile and fixed wireless small cell and tower backhaul, Intelligent

Highway Transportation Systems and public safety radio communications must all be accounted for in the designs being developed with this one-time federal money. If not, this oversight will rival the yet to be fully revealed, and atrocious, EB5 scandal in significance when the squandered opportunity is fully brought to light, but after it's too late.

The shortages of skilled labor and materials for fiber building projects also calls into question the prudence and wisdom of using various 2022 CUD build plans as a reason to skip the statewide engineered fiber design. Even if it were possible for Eustis Cable Enterprises of Brookfield, and others building fiber to attract enough skilled personnel from elsewhere in far-flung states to complete their CCI commitments, CUDs would still be unable to meet the unrealistic expectations they are now creating.

A sober recognition is needed of scale of the workforce shortages, the immediate opportunity to position Vermont and the Vermont Technical College as THE national fiber builder/wireless training center, the advantages to economic development (JOBS) and resilience benefit of training Vermonters and having Vermont's fiber built by local personnel who will then be here to repair and restore service after major storms cannot be overemphasized.

This necessitates that your agencies and the Governor bring attention and persuasion to the Legislature and the VCBB of both the need for the statewide engineered fiber design, the resilience imperative and the likely missed opportunity should each CUD continue to be allowed to do its own thing, thereby forfeiting the

substantial yet un-quantified revenues to the CUDs for the resilient public safety grade communications circuits that will instead accrue to FirstLight, Consolidated Communications and Velco.

And I won't herein detail the conflicts of having a legislator on the VCBB and at the same time on the two oversight committees, whose role it is to supposedly recommend legislation next January to right the course; or Velco having a conflict of evading transparency and accountability of their (our) own infrastructure for the potentially most cost-effective role of Velco as the most underutilized, resilient fiber capacity statewide, while also being 51% owned by Vermont electric ratepayers; or the VCBB Chair expected to be voting funds to WEC or their partner CVFiber, where she has until now been the General Manager of WEC, whose RUS financing is in no way assured due to the lack of a track record for any CVFiber revenues to repay an RUS loan; or the director of a new broadband affordability non-profit whose salary is being paid from funds donated by those same would-be recipients of VCBB grants!

We can and we must do better!

Stephen Whitaker

Montpelier