

Memorandum



To: Greater Wausau Prosperity Partnership
From: John Robinson, Marathon County Broadband Task Force Chair
Date: February 2, 2022
Re: Broadband Expansion Efforts in Marathon County

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update to you relating to Marathon County's efforts to expand access to broadband services to our residents. As you may be aware, current statutes limit the role that local units of government can play in providing broadband services. Therefore, while we can make investments in building capacity, or the backbone commonly referred to as the "middle mile," the County is limited in providing the service directly to businesses and residents, commonly referred to as the "last mile."

Background

The County Board has recognized a need to expand broadband access which resulted in the commissioning of a [Broadband Gap Analysis](#) from Ebert & Associates in 2009. The report found:

- *"Broadband offerings in Marathon County are diverse in capacity and costs."*
- *"There are instances in which the lack of broadband capacity leaves rural small businesses and residents at a distinct disadvantage."*
- 64% of residents and 26% of businesses are dissatisfied with their internet service.
- The quality of copper cabling to some homes is too poor for DSL to work.
- Rolling countryside with hills and dales and dense foliage present challenges for wireless coverage.

At that time, the County decided to let the "free market" approach work relying on Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to fill the gaps.

Key Milestones

- From **2009 to 2011**, government, health care systems, and educational institutions expanded the fiber ring for the Wausau Community Area Network.
- In **2015**, Frontier Communications sought funding through Phase II of the Connect America Fund, committing to provide 10 mbps download and 1 mbps upload speeds to areas in eastern Marathon County. Other providers also expanded their coverage footprint. Most of the expansion was in the Wausau metro area, where the providers could receive a higher return on investment leaving rural areas underserved. Those speeds are not adequate to meet the demand today.

- In **2015**, the County Board created a Broadband Connectivity Task Force to recommend strategies and policies to address connectivity and speed of internet access in rural Marathon County. That Task Force made several recommendations, including:
 - Work with Non-Governmental Entities & Internet Service Providers (ISP) to Open Lines of Communication
 - Develop & Implement a County-wide Dig Once Policy to Enable the Adoption of Broadband Expansion
 - Develop & Implement a County-wide Emergency Tower Use Policy for Wireless Broadband Expansion
- In response to growing complaints of the lack of reliable internet services throughout the County, the County Board retained Design Nine in **2018** to complete a [Broadband Assessment and Plan](#). The report presented in 2020 reviewed progress made since the preparation of the 2009 gap analysis and found that little had changed in rural areas of the County. Design Nine developed a plan that proposed constructing a series of towers with a fiber ring to provide wireless internet services to over 85% of the County. The cost for the plan was in excess of \$30 million.
- In light of the limitation on the County providing the last mile connection, a meeting with the ISPs serving the County was organized in March 2020. This meeting aimed to determine if the County built the system, would the ISPs rent the towers and fiber. There was little interest in leasing space from the County at that time.

Recent Efforts

The County created a Broadband Task Force in 2020 to: develop recommendations identifying the potential role of Marathon County in facilitating the expansion of Broadband access in Marathon County; review the Design Nine report and develop broad policies and partnership recommendations relating to the expansion of broadband/internet services throughout the County.

In late 2019 and early 2020, County Board members began receiving complaints of deteriorating copper phone lines and the lack of cellular service in northern and western portions of the County. The lack of reliable service created public safety issues associated with not having a reliable means to contact 911 in an emergency. A meeting was held with Frontier, and as a result, additional technicians were brought in to address the line failures. However, the lack of cell coverage and internet remained an issue. As a result, the Broadband Task Force identified this area as a priority in broadband expansion efforts.

The Task Force recommended that the County Board provide funding for broadband expansion, and as a result, the [2021 County Budget](#) earmarked \$250,000 for those efforts. However, the Task Force also set criteria making any funding conditional on the provider being able to offer at least 50/10 mbps service.

The Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC) had two solicitations for Broadband Expansion Grants in 2021. In the first round, the County partnered with Bug Tussel, Northwoods Connect, and Cirrinity on applications. As a result, Cirrinity was awarded funding for a project that served 88 properties in the Town of Reid.

In July 2021, the PSC held a second round of applications utilizing American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. In this round, Marathon County partnered with four ISPs on five applications. Unfortunately, there was only one award serving the areas around Norrie and Pike Lakes in the eastern portion of the County.

Earlier in 2021, the Federal Communication Commission notified CCO (Charter) and LTD of successful bids in reverse auctions associated with the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. They have submitted a long-form application to determine eligibility as part of the approval process. If successful, they will provide gigabyte service to approximately 9,683 homes/businesses, primarily in the northern and western parts of the County. The FCC has been slow in giving approval, and once it is given, the companies have up to 10 years to provide service. The County has been working with parties to accelerate deployment.

In July 2021, the County Board adopted a resolution authorizing the submittal of a grant application to the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA), in partnership with Charter on a \$20 million project providing internet services in eastern Marathon County. The application is currently under review.

In October 2021, the County Board adopted resolutions allowing Bug Tussel to access conduit borrowing. Marathon County was part of a multi-county coalition that partnered with Bug Tussel. In exchange for the County's guarantee to back the bonds, Bug Tussel was able to access a lower interest rate of 3.24% and will provide the County with access to fiber strands and their towers in the County. Bug Tussel will be installing approximately 370 miles of fiber and 16 towers in 2022. Bug Tussel will connect properties along their fiber route over the next couple of years and offer wireless services around their towers. They are also partnering with AT&T to expand cellular coverage in the service area.

Future Opportunities

Marathon County will receive in excess of \$26.3 million through the American Rescue Plan to address issues associated with the pandemic. One of the eligible activities is funding broadband expansion. An equal amount of funds will be distributed amongst towns, villages, and cities in the County. The County is evaluating how to best utilize those funds and will consider leveraging those funds to expand broadband services. Our preference is to partner with other governments and maximize the use of additional federal and state funds.

In March 2022, the PSC will be accepting applications for the Broadband Expansion Grants. The Task Force has contacted the ISPs serving the County to determine if they are interested in partnering with the County. Responses are due February 14th. The County has \$114,000 remaining in the capital improvement fund to partner with those ISPs. Our review of successful grant applications in previous rounds showed that applications that demonstrated strong local partnerships scored higher. Over the next month, we will be reaching out to you for your support of potential applications both in terms of letters of support as well as a potential funding partner. The County and the Marshfield Clinic Health System were financial partners in the two successful grant applications to date.

Recently, the Economic Development Agencies in the state contracted with GeoPartners to conduct speed tests to identify unserved and underserved areas. This information is critical to determine where we should focus our future efforts and to support future grant applications. Given the lack of reliable data, it is vital that we have as many individuals and businesses as possible participate in the speed test. Please see the attached flyer for additional information and consider encouraging your employees and others to take the speed test.

Future Challenges

The recently passed federal Infrastructure Bill set aside \$65 billion for broadband expansion. One of the new components is addressing Digital Equity to ensure that parties not only have access to the internet but that they can afford it as well. Through the PSC, the State of Wisconsin is developing a plan to address these issues. Marathon County will need to evaluate its role in these efforts as we look forward.

The County is willing to work with any internet service provider to expand reliable service with a long-term goal of fiber to the premises. Our success will be determined by the partnerships we are able to form.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with an update. Please feel free to contact me at john.robinson@co.marathon.wi.us or at 715-212-2227 with any questions.

WHAT IS YOUR

INTERNET SPEED?



The North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, in partnership with Marathon County, is conducting a regional internet speed testing initiative.

Many communities that need broadband funding may miss out because the data showing their need isn't available. The goal of this project is to create an accurate regional map of where internet service is and is not available in Central Wisconsin and what speeds people are currently receiving.

Take the speed test today and encourage your friends, neighbors, and co-workers to do the same!

Scan



Visit



[www.ncwrpc.org/ncwrpc2021/
broadband-speed-test/](http://www.ncwrpc.org/ncwrpc2021/broadband-speed-test/)

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