

How Bremen worked with provider to seek broadband funds

As in Roque Bluffs, some residents in Bremen were dissatisfied with their connectivity. They've been working with Tidewater and the Island Institute.

By Cheryl Ferrara

Whenever the subject of internet access is raised at public meetings in Bremen, a small town in Lincoln County, officials get an earful from residents. Non fiber-optic customers of Tidewater Telecom, the town's incumbent service provider, voice multiple complaints. They want faster service at reasonable costs as quickly as possible, and they hope Bremen's Board of Selectmen will help them.

A couple decades ago, Tidewater was an early adopter of the switch from dial-up internet to DSL, installing the "modern" copper infrastructure throughout its footprint in Bremen. However, DSL quickly became outdated. Several years ago, Tidewater was able to access a ConnectME grant to build eight miles of new fiber-optic network in some Bremen areas with the slowest speeds. Twenty-five miles of the town remained on DSL, creating an underserved population that expected more for the monthly price they were paying.

Some called for a new provider. Spectrum delivers high-speed internet to the adjacent Town of Damariscotta. Some suggested the town should establish its own service. Other Maine communities including Islesboro, Calais and Baileyville have public broadband utilities.

For Bremen, with 803 full-time and seasonal residents spread over a forested coastal area, establishing municipal ownership was not feasible. A public utility would take years to plan and build and require more knowledge and staffing than Bremen was able to provide.

Word reached Tidewater, and in July 2019, the company approached the select board with a proposal to develop the most advanced Fiber to the Home (FTTH) technology for the town. The project would primarily involve Tidewater's private investment, but Tidewater also proposed a \$50,000 contribution from Bremen toward a ConnectMaine Infrastructure grant application. The select board had heard so much from disgruntled residents that it met Tidewater's request with skepticism, going as far as reaching out to the nearby provider as an alternative.

'People know people'

However, as small towns work, people know people, and by word of mouth a broadband group had begun forming that spring. Yvonne Gloede of the Bremen Library knew that resident Christa Thorpe had a new job. Thorpe, an ex-schoolteacher and current school board member, now was working at the Island Institute, a progressive community development organization in Rockland that supported island and coastal community broadband efforts. Yvonne connected Thorpe to Ernest Carroll, who recently retired to Bremen after summering in the area for more than 40 years. Carroll had shared with Yvonne his concern about how the lack of broadband was preventing younger people from moving to Maine.

Thorpe and Carroll met to discuss internet service. Using the Island Institute's "Community-Driven Broadband



Christa Thorpe (Photo courtesy of Island Institute.)

Guide," they formed an informal working group and approached the select board, offering to work on the issue. The select board directed them to Sam Hafford, who had decades of experience in internet and cable deployment. As a resident of Bremen, Hafford was attending the Lincoln County Regional Planning Commission meetings of local towns engaged in a ConnectME planning grant. Interest in the regional committee came too late for Bremen to be part of that grant.

Brian Withers, once a vacationer to Newcastle, joined the group after moving to Bremen. As a global data analyst for Cisco, Withers added technical expertise to the committee. Earlier, he had rented a cooperative workspace in Damariscotta that closed after a year and a half. As a new Bremen resident with a five-year-old son, renting a solitary office in a fiber-serviced area such as Damariscotta proved too expensive. He was looking for at-home, high-

Cheryl Ferrara is a Maine-based writer who worked with officials in the Town of Bremen to submit this article.



Christa Thorpe explaining the Tidewater partnership at a public forum on Feb. 29.
(Photo courtesy of the Lincoln County News.)

speed internet to fill the gap.

Matthew Hanly, a Bremen school committee member, joined the group concerned that students without adequate internet would have difficulty keeping up with peers.

During the summer and while remaining autonomous, the informal group established goals and priorities that would secure the select board's approval. The group kept the board informed of work plans without sacrificing space for creativity and discussion.

Thorpe remembers that was a good decision. The group needed time without pressure to coalesce and think through strategies. The select board had pushed back on the \$50,000 request from Tidewater. Residents were pressuring the board to get something done quickly.

On Sept. 5, the select board officially appointed the working group as the Bremen Broadband Committee and approved its three main goals: 100 percent service to Bremen residents with no household left behind; every installation to be fiber, thereby allowing high-speed service to all; and, affordability for everyone including those where costs would be a hardship.

Taking the steps

First steps with Tidewater were lengthy. The committee and the provider went back and forth on preliminary ideas. The committee asked detailed questions and requests of the company. Tidewater is owned by Lincoln Communications, Inc., so proposals needed to go up and down the chain of command.

Tidewater also needed to gain the trust of the select board and residents. The committee required complete transparency of itself and all parties to repair relationships and avoid misunderstandings.

To engage residents, the committee sent town emails, announcing meetings and recapping discussions with Tidewater. The committee kept volleying ideas from Tidewater and residents. In November, Tidewater presented the committee with an official proposal.

Residents frequently complained

about the prices Tidewater charged. Driving prices down to national or global rates appeared desirable, but the committee recognized a local company had higher costs that realistically fell to consumers.

Tidewater offer 'fair'

By researching competitors' pricing, the committee helped residents understand that Tidewater was offering a fair deal, although a sticking point remained that as a telecommunications company, Tidewater would require landline phone service with internet installations.

The committee's willingness to dive into the details fueled the hope of building a new level of trust. The committee also solicited a verbal commitment from Tidewater to explore subsidies for families in need without passing those costs on to other customers.

The first proposal, however, was destined to change. The original 23 miles of connections for \$400,000 rose to 25 miles at \$725,000. Community mapping found more than 600 residences needed service or fiber upgrades compared with the original 460. The question of seasonal residents connecting to fiber lines remained open.

For Tidewater, working at this depth with a committee was a new experience. In Thorpe's view, the company gained knowledge that would help in future broadband planning.



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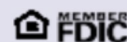
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The committee explained to residents that the stumbling block of identifying all underserved and unserved homes could not be helped. No reliable local or State of Maine data maps currently exist, so the combined efforts of Tidewater and the committee were critical.

The proposal relied on receiving another ConnectMaine grant. Tidewater committed to 80 percent of installation infrastructure costs and looked to the grant to supply the final 20 percent. Tidewater also waived the \$50,000 town contribution. The proposal was signed by the select board on March 6.

Even without a financial commitment, Bremen was able to contribute "in-kind" assistance for the grant application process. The committee began surveying residents to learn their needs, current internet availabilities and speeds. Surveys were returned via email or in writing by mail or town office drop off. The survey asked if residents supported the joint effort of the town and Tidewater to pursue the ConnectME grant. A successful grant application must demonstrate commu-

nity support from at least 85 percent of residents in unserved areas. The survey also gathered data about digital literacy to aid in providing competencies through the library or another learning center.

Building support

The committee circulated a petition asking for residents' support and conducted drive-by observations of current lines and services. Notable

town residents were asked to write letters of support to accompany the grant application. The committee continued its weekly update calls with Tidewater.

Benefits to the community were always foremost to committee members. High-speed internet addressed the town's Comprehensive Plan by supporting small and homebased businesses. The project would bridge telehealth and aging in place for doctors and families. Dr. Mike Clark spoke at



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the committee's Public Forum. Originally from Maine, Clark was educated away and came back to set up his medical practice. With changing access to medical records and telehealth, he recognized how dependent his work would be on reliable internet 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

With high-speed access, students could complete their school work or GEDs online and higher education

could be accessed, thereby closing the digital divide in education. In recent weeks, with the Coronavirus, working and studying from home have never been so necessary or so challenging for underserved communities. Providing high-speed internet could prove invaluable at such times.

As the process unfolded, commitments replaced distrust, a partnership was restored, and a grant application

came to fruition with hard work and transparency being key.

For the committee, next steps include completing surveys and petitions; and then hopefully, being selected as a ConnectME grant recipient. That's something the committee won't know until after May 2020. At this time and due to Coronavirus delays, ConnectMaine is expecting the grant rounds to be delayed about a month. ■

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MEETING IT ADVICE

Maine Municipal Association's IT Department, using some information originated by the City of South Portland, has produced a document that helps local leaders use Zoom meeting technology reliably.

Among the topics covered:

- Creating Zoom meetings using a password.
- Controlling access.
- How to mute participants.
- How to turn off the chat function.
- And, importantly, how to block videos on Zoom.

Details about these tips – and much more – are posted at MMA's main website, <http://www.memun.org>. Just click on the Coronavirus Resource icon to the upper left of the home page.

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