

Courage, persistence: Roque Bluffs takes a big step forward

After years of struggling with slow internet speeds and spotty service, this town of 300 people voted to pursue a major USDA broadband grant. And it won.

By Susan Cover

A little over two years ago, Roque Bluffs Select Board members decided they'd had enough of dealing with slow internet speeds.

Board member Lisa Hanscom went two months with no internet service. Fellow board member Karen Miller was so frustrated with her sluggish connection that she called her provider, Axiom, to complain.

"He explained what the constraints were with the technology they have," Miller said. "It wasn't going to get better."

Board members then called the Island Institute in Rockland, which had worked with other small towns to expand broadband. A representative from the institute and Axiom came to a meeting of the Select Board, where it became apparent that the rural Washington County town of 300 residents didn't have an internet service provider problem, it had an infrastructure problem.

Miller and other select board members felt strongly that they needed to address the issue and they all agreed that everybody in town needed access.

"Just because we live rurally doesn't mean we can't have what the rest of the world can have," she said.

After two years of meetings, planning and grant writing, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced in January that tiny Roque Bluffs was the recipient of an \$893,170 grant to build a fiber-optic network to connect



Roque Bluffs Town Hall

166 homes, 22 farms and 16 businesses in the town. Roque Bluffs was one of four entities in Maine to receive a USDA grant as part of a federal rural broadband initiative.

Arrowsic, Monhegan Plantation, and the Biddeford Internet Corporation also received grants or loans, according to the USDA. During a ceremony at the Arrowsic Volunteer Fire Station, USDA Rural Development Under Secretary Donald LaVoy said the federal funds will create or improve internet access for 4,527 households and 215 businesses in rural Maine as part of the USDA's Re-Connect Pilot Program.

Miller and others in Roque Bluffs hope their success inspires other small towns to try for major initiatives, even though the odds may seem long at

first. Select Board member Owen Moody said it's a massive project for a town Roque Bluffs' size and that, at first, not everyone in town wanted to move forward.

"A lot of people were leery about it," he said. "They couldn't see outside the box."

Step by step

Once the town leaders decided they wanted to move forward, Miller said they needed to find out how much it would cost. Using \$10,000 from the Island Institute, they hired an engineering firm to give them estimates for what they would be looking at in terms of needed finances, she said.

Those types of engineering studies can cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$100,000 depending on the level of services needed,

said Stephenie MacLagan, senior community development officer with the Island Institute. She worked closely with Roque Bluffs to guide the town through the process, which is an example of the programming and services the institute provides to 120 coastal and island communities.

"At the end of the day, towns like Roque Bluffs don't have the population density for a business to make capital investments," she said. "One way to address the market failure is for the community to help with the build out."

In Roque Bluffs, the engineering firm came back with a \$1.1 million price tag, which seemed insurmountable for such a small town. That's when its leaders started looking around for federal grants to help pick

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up the cost. They held public hearings to get citizen input and continued to hear complaints about spotty internet, Miller said.

Hanscom, now a former select board member who spent 19 years on the panel, said the board continually asked for citizen input and help throughout the process. And even though some people in town didn't think they had a chance to land a big federal grant, Hanscom said they kept moving forward.

"It's not something you'd expect a little town like Roque Bluffs to do," she said.

With continued help from the Island Institute, they gathered letters of support from local business owners and residents to accompany their formal grant application to the USDA. They asked for help from a summer resident – an astrophysicist at the University of Arizona, who has experience in grant writing – to help craft the document.

Then in May 2019, they held a town meeting to ask residents to give them permission to apply for the grant and for permission to borrow up to \$1 million if the grant was rejected. Miller said it was important for the town to show the USDA that they were serious about the project and would be willing to move forward whether they got the grant or not.

Town meeting vote

After a vote of 63-27, town officials had the go-ahead to finish the grant and get it submitted by the May 31, 2019 deadline. In the meantime, the town formed a Fiber Optic Broadband Advisory Board and worked out a contract with Axiom to create a public/private partnership so the town would own the infrastructure, but Axiom would manage it for the town.

MacLagan said a key to success in Roque Bluffs was that the select board got community buy-in. She has seen other towns go through the planning

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process and present the idea at a town meeting, only to be rejected by residents.

"Communities need to be courageous and show leadership," she said. "This is one of those communities that put in a lot of hard work."

In December, the town found out it would get the grant, with a formal announcement from the federal government in January. It's important to note too that the USDA requires the town to kick-in \$297,000 of its own money, although Miller hopes a \$50,000 Connect Maine grant from the state will reduce that to \$247,000.

Even after winning the grant, there was much work to do, Miller said. The town called the state Department of Environmental Protection to ask for help with an environmental review to make sure that they would not disturb endangered species habitat, either by removing trees or installing new utility poles. It had informed the Maine Historic Preservation Commission that the work would not impact any historic sites.

And it was required to inform local Native American tribes of the project.

Miller had planned to travel to Dallas in mid-March 2020 for training from the USDA on how to administer the grant, but the conference was canceled at a time when many large events were being postponed because of the coronavirus. She's unsure whether it will be rescheduled or whether the training will be done online.

This summer, Miller hopes to see new utility poles installed and the beginning of what's expected to be a five- to six-month process to license each pole. It's not likely that broadband will make it to homes or businesses this year; Miller said she has yet to develop a "real time calendar."

"One of the select board jobs is to cheerlead for patience," she said. "Because we're getting that money it will take a little longer. We're all so tired of dealing with what we have."

Out of town trips

Miller noted some of the problems with the current service, both from her personal experience and that of others in town.

When she has to download paperwork for the town, she often travels



Owen Moody

to a friend's house in Machias – six miles away – so she has the needed bandwidth. She knows of families who take their children into Machias so they can do homework and one family that travels to Helen's restaurant, also in Machias, so it can have a strong enough internet signal to communicate with physicians.

And, though there are 10 computers at the Roque Bluffs fire station, only four to five can be used at a time

HIRING RESOURCES

Perhaps the best website for help with recruiting and other personnel-related questions is the one run by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM): www.shrm.org

That website offers resource materials on hundreds of topics, including "external recruitment" and "talent acquisition."

The **Maine Local Government Human Resources Association** is another resource. You can see who leads that group – and get contact information – through its website: www.mlghra.org

Maine Municipal Association runs a campaign called Hometown Careers, aimed at increasing awareness about municipal employment. Video and handout tools are available for members to use when talking to high school and college students, and other job candidates. (www.memun.org or www.mainehometowncareers.org)



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because there's a weak signal, she said. "It terrifies me to think about where we'll be in five years without fiber optic broadband," she said.

Miller is working to get additional

money – nearly \$27,000 from the Island Institute – to help pay for a certified public accountant to track the federal grant money and for additional compensation for the town trea-

surer who will also work on the grant.

Hanscom continues to serve on the town's broadband committee, which meets monthly. The group will help oversee the project through its completion and serve as a place for residents to register concerns, complaints or other types of feedback about the new service.

When it comes to advice for other small towns looking to do a major project, Hanscom said it's important not to get intimidated by the initial price tag.

"There's always ways to work through it," she said. "As town officials, you have to present it to the town. We had a lot of public hearings. After each meeting, we kept on asking them, 'Do you want us to move forward?' "

Miller said many people in town, both year-round and summer residents, played a role in successfully getting the grant.

"We had a moment of courage as a small town to step forward and see where this will take us," she said. "It happened because a lot of people came together." ■

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