

Litchfield Broadband Committee: Legislature should support community broadband

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By Litchfield Broadband Committee

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Broadband internet is a critical utility similar to electricity and clean water that is needed to provide daily services to our homes and businesses. This service is not only used for entertainment, but today it is at the center of important activities, including telehealth, home businesses, electronic banking, remote education, home shopping and telecommuting.

As we are quickly learning in the age of COVID-19, broadband is essential to providing vital links with the outside world and maintain connections to our loved ones when we need to isolate ourselves at in our homes.

Unfortunately, the infrastructure to support internet access in rural Maine is akin to that of electricity distribution 100 years ago. The present patchwork of cable TV, phone company DSL, and high-latency satellite services provide incomplete coverage, with many rural homes and businesses getting substandard or no service at all.

Poor rural internet service has a significant negative impact on the economy of Maine. Small businesses and those who could telecommute are unable to locate in otherwise productive locations. Home buyers look at broadband as an essential feature in evaluating prospective purchases. As new technologies, applications and services evolve, Maine is in danger of falling further behind other states that are investing heavily in internet connectivity.

The current approach in Maine is to address this need by supporting towns and/or regions to develop their own plans and infrastructure solutions. Like many others, Litchfield has formed a broadband committee to assess our needs and formulate a plan to implement high-speed internet services to all households and businesses in our town. We are educating ourselves by surveying residents about current services, talking to existing and potential providers to understand gaps and determine possible courses of action, and sharing this knowledge to build public awareness.



It is a significant challenge for each small town to do this. But for those of us who cannot get service, there are no alternatives. In projects such as this, the greater the scale in terms of geography, the more attractive it will be for internet service providers to invest in our communities. Bundling our needs with those of nearby towns will result in a lower cost on a per town basis. We will be actively seeking out neighboring communities to partner with us in the coming weeks.

The state agency ConnectME was formed to help support community broadband efforts. It has proposed a State of Maine Broadband Action Plan (available at www.maine.gov/connectme) that calls for the state to invest at least \$30 million per year for five years to meet a goal of having high-speed internet access available to 95% of Mainers by 2025. This would fund 25% of the cost needed to accomplish the goal, with other funds coming from the federal government, municipalities and the private sector.

The Legislature is presently considering two measures to begin funding this plan: \$15 million from the general revenue fund surplus and \$15 million in a bond. Please ask your legislators to support this effort. Thank you.

Larry Bell, committee chairman, submitted this column on behalf of the Litchfield Broadband Committee, with members Joline Bell, David Blocher, Cheri Cooledge, Tom Wood and Josh O'Neill.

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