



**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY BOARD**  
**BROADBAND TASK FORCE AGENDA**

County of Champaign, Urbana, Illinois  
Monday, June 10, 2024 - 6:30 p.m.

Shields-Carter Meeting Room  
Brookens Administrative Center  
1776 E. Washington St., Urbana

**MINUTES – Approved As Distributed**

Members Present: Bailey Conrady, M.C. Neal, Stephanie Burnett, Samantha Carter, Mike Smith, Eric Thorsland, and Jeff Wilson. (Mike Smeltzer-Zoom)

Members Absent: Lorraine Cowart

Others Present: Michelle Jett (Director of Administration), Tim Arbeiter-Zoom (Finley Engineering), Craig Hall- Zoom (Nextlink), Peter Folk & Jason Young (VOLO), Paul Hixon-Zoom, Kaitlyn Kuzio (Grant Coordinator), and Elisabeth Dillingham (Recording Secretary)

**Agenda Items**

**I. Call to Order**

Ms. Conrady called the meeting to order at 6:41p.m.

**II. Roll Call**

Roll call was taken, and a quorum was declared present.

**III. Approval of Agenda/Addendum**

**MOTION** by Mr. Smith to approve the agenda; seconded by Ms. Carter. Upon voice vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

**IV. Approval of Minutes**

A. January 29, 2024

**MOTION** by Mr. Smith to approve the minutes of the January 29, 2024, meeting, seconded by Mr. Wilson. Upon voice vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

**V. Public Participation**

There was no Public Participation.

**VI. Communications**

There were no communications.

**VII. New Business**

**A. Update from Volo**

Mr. Peter Folk, founder of VOLO, was present to discuss their current progress of pursuing digital divide and equity throughout the County. Mr. Tim Arbeiter from Finley Engineering navigated the PowerPoint while Mr. Folk gave the presentation. Volo is basically on track with the plans. There are two projects they are working on. The first project is Connect Champaign County Fiber Now. This project is in phase one of building a fiber backbone within Champaign County. This phase will bring fiber Internet to 596 rural premises. Their application has been approved. They are receiving 4.7

56 million dollars of County funding and 7.1 million dollars of state funding. The project timeline of  
57 completion is at the end of 2025.  
58

59 The second project is Volo Champaign Housing Authority (VCHAP) which is the absolute most in  
60 need from an economic standpoint in the community. This project will provide next generation, W-  
61 Fi- seven in every housing authority managed unit. Training and management for maintenance over  
62 the next five years is included. The goal of the project is to cut out any financial challenges and  
63 provide effective training to users. It has not been funded by the state yet. Volo has decided to roll  
64 out and pivot to VCHAP 2.0, which is a slim down version of the VCHAP project. Champaign  
65 County, Volo, and Housing Authority have all allocated resources for this project. Mr. Folk is hoping  
66 they get the approval to proceed with VCHAP 2.0 from the Broadband Committee. This will service  
67 355 homes with 450 total access points. If there is no current wiring in the Housing Authority  
68 properties, they will not be able to include those properties. The properties they can service are more  
69 likely to have school aged children in these areas. The County provided \$195,000 funding and he is  
70 hoping they can continue to pursue VCHAP 2.0. Summer of next year would be the completion date  
71 with five years of service for residents starting at the completion date. Properties this project would  
72 serve are Providence at Thornberry, Crystal View, Highland Green, Pinewood Place, Douglas Square,  
73 and the manor at Prairie Crossing. This serves 355 units or 721 beds, up to 721 people served, and  
74 438 access points.  
75

76 Mr. Neal asked if they have had conversation with the Housing Authority on the proposed plan and  
77 how it would affect the people they are leaving out.  
78

79 Mr. Folk stated he has not had any conversations regarding the people who are left out and  
80 acknowledged he probably should have more conversations about that. He added the next round of  
81 funding through the State of Illinois Connect Illinois funding is more focused on digital equity.  
82 VOLO will re-propose for that phase of funding to complete the rest of the project, so no one is left  
83 out.  
84

85 Mr. Young from Volo stated they can utilize the initial programs as a pilot program to obtain data to  
86 focus on future applications for equity and inclusion.  
87

88 Ms. Carter asked how they chose who would be served and who would be served later.  
89

90 Mr. Folk stated it is based on who has existing CAT 5 wiring.  
91

92 Mr. Thorsland inquired about rural easement and access for the backbone.  
93

94 Mr. Folk stated they will not work on it in a final way until the project is almost over so no one shows  
95 up and stops it. They are working with the Farm Bureau on those concerns and the project.  
96

97 Ms. Conrady congratulated Volo on their Fiber Now funding. She explained the easement situation is  
98 favorable to both the landowners and Internet Service Providers (ISP) Once the maps are laid out, the  
99 appropriate people will be contacted.  
100

101 Mr. Wilson asked why the Connect Illinois funding fell through.  
102

103 Mr. Folk stated he was not officially informed it was denied but believes it has since he hasn't been  
104 informed it was approved.  
105

106 Discussion ensued regarding the importance of the elderly community and homes with children  
107 having access to Internet access.  
108

109 Mr. Wilson asked when support starts for the install.  
110  
111 Mr. Folk replied that the support starts after the installation is complete. For instance, if a device  
112 stops working, the homeowner can call the company for assistance and a technician will respond if  
113 needed.

114  
115 Mr. Neal confirmed with Mr. Folk that the ISP is independent of the project.

116  
117 Discussion ensued between Taskforce Board Members regarding service options and affordability.

118  
119 Ms. Burnett stated there has been no discussion from the Housing Authority about internet service at  
120 this time. She added that some of the common areas do have internet service, however, there are also  
121 locations that have no wiring or wi-fi. She advised the board there was a 2024 plan that needs  
122 approved by HUD, the rent will be reduced which may provide a way for them to obtain internet  
123 service to their home.

124  
125 Mr. Folk stated the smallest of units is Manor at the Crossing with single 18 beds and the largest is  
126 Providence at Thornberry with 160 units and 360 beds. He estimated the average price per unit for  
127 Broadband is \$25.00-\$30.00 per month for the lowest cost.

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129  
130 **B. Update from Nextlink**

131  
132 Mr. Craig Hall from Nextlink spoke via zoom regarding updates of their process.  
133 He indicated Nextlink did not receive the grant funding from the state. Mr. Hall spoke about  
134 other options to utilize the money to provide internet access. There was no feedback from the State  
135 of Illinois as to why their project was not awarded.

136  
137 Ms. Jett advised the board what Administration is looking for from the Broadband Taskforce  
138 Committee. Nextlink had the more rural plan which requires more construction and more land for fewer  
139 houses.

140  
141 There are two options left for Nextlink to utilize the County funding that was given to them.

- 142  
143 1) Do what they can with the ARPA money that was given to them to get something in the ground.  
144 2) Talk about options with fixed wireless systems.

145  
146 This is a bit different than what was consistently discussed with the Taskforce. Ms. Jett asked  
147 the Taskforce to speak with Mr. Hall about what the fixed wireless option is and determine it is in  
148 line with the mission and vision of what we are trying to accomplish prior to drafting a proposal  
149 of how that would work.

150  
151 Mr. Hall stated Nextlink offers broadband, and the terminology is a matter of speed which is  
152 incredibly fast. He explained fiber can scale up easier and fixed wireless can scale but would  
153 require updated equipment after 6-8 years. With fixed wireless, radios with antennas are installed on  
154 exterior structures throughout the County in sectors to aim outwards and equipment would be placed in  
155 the homes. If a frequency becomes too full, it will create jamming and a loss of service. Mr.  
156 Hall talked about the Pros & Cons of what Nextlink can offer. The minimum cost of a plan at  
157 100 megabits per second is around \$49.00 a month. A router would be required in the residence.  
158 He compared the install to installing a DISH. He stated the cost is 15% less than the cost of fiber.  
159 The install is quick, and the project could be completed by the end of the year. He talked about lag  
160 and said the system does not have those issues. Installation costs are \$150.00 with a contract period  
161 or \$250.00 for an installation charge with no contract.

162  
163 There was discussion by multiple Taskforce members who were concerned about Nextlink connectivity  
164 issues and outages due to the weather. One concern came from a Taskforce member who is a current  
165 Nextlink customer who has experienced connectivity issues and outages in the past due to inclement  
166 weather. Mr. Hall stated rain, ice, and snow does not make a significant impact on the fixed wireless  
167 service. Mr. Hall stated a very heavy rain might knock out service. He indicated his service trucks  
168 usually respond to outages within a few hours. He talked about regularly updating equipment to ensure it  
169 is not outdated. He ensured the Board he would do his very best to earn the trust of the committee which  
170 requires time and history. He stated his company is currently operating in 12 states across the country.  
171  
172 Mr. Neal asked if the Taskforce went with this route, would customers be able to choose their own ISP, or  
173 would they have to use Nextlink. He also inquired who absorbs the cost of outdated equipment that needs  
174 replaced.  
175  
176 Mr. Hall stated it would be Nextlinks product and Nextlinks service. Mr. Hall also advised the committee  
177 when there is upgrade to the external equipment, the homes would need upgraded equipment as well. The  
178 upgrades to the equipment installed in residences would be at the cost of Nextlink.  
179  
180 Mr. Smeltzer appeared via Zoom. He asked Mr. Hall if the ARDOF money awarded to Nextlink has been  
181 utilized. He expressed concern about Mr. Hall stating bands travel through leaves on trees. He then  
182 questioned Mr. Hall about his comment regarding lower latency on the new equipment versus fiber. Mr.  
183 Smeltzer stated he would like a report on supportive data. He advised Mr. Hall that if he were to install  
184 a wall to wall 120 fixed wireless system in every home or geographical area within Champaign County,  
185 he would kill the ability for anyone in the County to obtain federal or state funds for Broadband ever  
186 again. He does not believe it is a good idea. Fixed wireless is a quick fix but not a long-term solution Mr.  
187 Smelter is comfortable with to properly serve future generations.  
188  
189 Mr. Hall stated the ARDOF money has been used to install various towers east to west throughout the  
190 County. He was unclear as to the exact numbers of towers installed but estimated there are 10-12. Mr.  
191 Hall related his equipment penetrates a moderate amount of tree coverage. He stated it is different in the  
192 winter when the leaves are down. Mr. Hall spoke about the upgraded equipment and better frequency.  
193  
194 Mr. Smith asked about the type of antennas and frequencies which are used. He also discussed the  
195 physical limits and performance metrics of the system.  
196  
197 Mr. Hall stated the antennas are very advanced that are flat inside the housing of the radio. Mr. Hall  
198 stated he is not quite familiar with all the equipment. He related the new equipment has a multi-pathing  
199 frequency. He stated that all systems will have a drive testing to see how well the system is performing as  
200 soon as the installation takes place. The systems are them monitored for function capability.  
201  
202 Ms. Jett asked how many towers they have in the county at this time and if there are plans to add more  
203 towers.  
204  
205 Mr. Hall replied he believes they have double digit towers. They have plans to close some gaps and  
206 uncertain if it is on anyone's agenda.  
207  
208 Ms. Jett asked if the towers Champaign County is paying for is in those gaps or would they be new towers  
209 specifically for the areas identified on the map.  
210  
211 Mr. Hall replied that the gaps would be a major part of any plan. He added that just because there are  
212 towers in the community doesn't mean there are enough of them to cover the entire county. They would  
213 look at a potential overlap in how the towers cover the community.  
214

215 Mr. Wilson stated the county is about 1000 square miles. He estimated they would need about 25-35  
216 towers. He advised that close to 90% of the county is rural. He stated the other option is to do nothing.  
217 He acknowledged Mr. Smeltzer raised some interesting problems about the long-term goal of serving the  
218 entire community with the best fiber or broadband possible, along with the challenge of losing the bigger  
219 pot of money with state or federal funding. He reminded the committee that an option would be to just  
220 table the whole thing. He asked the time frame to re-apply for the funding that fell through.

221  
222 Mr. Arbeiter stated the current funding is winding down. They are oversubscribed, meaning too many  
223 people applied for the funding. He believes the next funding called “Connect Four” might be available in  
224 late summer or early fall. They do not have a definitive timeline of when the Broadband Equity, Access,  
225 and Deployment (**BEAD**) program funding will be available.

226  
227 Mr. Wilson asked Ms. Jett if the funding is lost and reallocated to something else and what the best choice  
228 is for allocation.

229  
230 Ms. Jett clarified the ARPA money needs to be allocated by the end of this year. She related the five  
231 million dollars is a significant amount of money that would require some real thought as to where it will  
232 go moving forward. A concern would be earmarking these funds for this project in hopes the grant gets  
233 awarded next round and it doesn’t. This leaves us with the five million dollars, we are then out of luck  
234 and didn’t come up with Plan B that we do not have time to execute. This is a huge infrastructure project  
235 that will take some time with construction and easements. The juncture with Nextlink we are at now is we  
236 have three choices.

- 237 1) Do we want a proposal from Nextlink for what they can do for fiber for five million dollars?
- 238 2) Do we want a proposal for what they can do for fixed wireless and fiber for five million dollars?
- 239 3) Do we want to talk about moving in a different direction and allocating the five million dollars to  
240 something else?

241  
242 Ms. Jett stated the committee needs to bring a recommendation to the County Board before we get heavy  
243 into the budget cycle before August. It would be a heavy lift to reallocate the funds.

244  
245 Mr. Hall stated this is not a quick and dirty fix. Nextlink is top heavy across the states they serve. They  
246 have a lot of fiber and even more fixed wireless with a ton of customers.

247  
248 Ms. Carter clarified the fixed wireless is less expensive so they can supply more of the county and the  
249 fiber optic is more expensive, more reliable, but less coverage as to how many people could be serviced.

250  
251 Ms. Jett informed Ms. Carter she was correct on all points. Ms. Jett stated we have fixed wireless within  
252 the county, and we do not have Broadband throughout the county. She reminded the committee the goal  
253 of the taskforce was to figure out how we can have Broadband throughout the county. Ms. Jett stated in  
254 terms of long-term possibilities, we have a Grant Coordinator, and we will have a lot of money for  
255 internet access the next 10-15 years so we can continue working on this issue for a long time if that is  
256 what the Taskforce wishes to do as the focus. Another option is an immediate fix for more fixed wireless  
257 for more access in the present time frame for people in rural communities.

258  
259 Ms. Carter sought clarification on Mr. Smeltzer’s previous comment on the possibility of losing future  
260 funding for Internet service. Ms. Conrady clarified that if those speeds of fixed wireless, at this point and  
261 time, would preclude those areas of Champaign County that are covered by that fixed wireless from being  
262 eligible for Federal and State grants that could put fiber in the ground because those people would be  
263 considered served and therefore be ineligible for additional grant funding.

264  
265 Mr. Smeltzer concurred and added that if 10-mile diameter areas are overlapped with towers, there will be  
266 people who are affected that aren’t even part of the project. Even outlining counties could be picked up  
267 as part of the process.

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Mr. Thorsland stated the original goal of the committee was to focus on broadband and fiber-based service to at least get a backbone which would ring around the county to continue trying to leverage funds that will continue to come up from state and federal government. He reiterated he wants to get everyone on good fiber. He explained his strong disappointment with fixed wireless service when the wind blows as he previously lived in the country. Long term, he prefers we get as much high-quality fiber in the county as possible. He stated he does not want to put a band-aid on this project and would like to do what they said they would do.

Mr. Neal agrees with Mr. Thorland’s comments.

Ms. Conrady reminded the committee it was formed to bring the best broadband they could to all citizens of the county, both urban and rural. For too long, we have just gotten by, and this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to do better than that. It is doing this project right and well. Ms. Conrady asked the board if they were agreeable to have Nextlink as a preferred prescriber, and to prepare a proposal of what they can offer for five million dollars.

Mr. Wilson stated he was not comfortable with that idea as we would re-open the que as to who would do the work.

Ms. Jett stated she researched the contract if a scenario presented if federal funding was denied. We are contractually bound to put forth a good faith effort. It would be a breach of contract if we did not ask Nextlink to draft an alternative and not come up with a draft as to what they could offer for five million dollars. Ms. Jett suggested that the Board ask Nextlink to draft a proposal of what they could offer for five million dollars for just fiber and go from there.

Mr. Hixson appeared via Zoom. He was previous U of I Chief Information Officer (CIO). He worked 42 years at the U of I in the College of Agriculture Extension. He cares about the underserved rural and urban folks. He concurs with what Mr. Smeltzer said. He stated he believes Mr. Hall is giving beyond a glossy interpretation of what fixed wireless would do. His concern is enabling a disservice to the community if we do not focus on true broadband.

Ms. Conrady explained the next steps. Nextlink was asked to prepare a proposal for what they can do for five million dollars in their areas of the county as laid out in the MOU with VOLO regarding fiber installation. To stay ahead of the budget process, a meeting will be scheduled as soon as they receive the Nextlink proposal in the next few weeks.

Ms. Jett stated we need to work out the timeline so the committee can receive the proposal and can review it to come up with a recommendation for the July County Board Meeting. We need to at least move forward in some direction.

**VIII. Other Business**

A. Date of next meeting-TBD.

**IX. Chair’s Report**

There was no Chair’s Report.

**X. Adjournment**

Ms. Conrady adjourned the meeting at 8:47 p.m.

*Please note the minutes reflect the order of the agenda and may not necessarily reflect the order of business conducted at the meeting.*