



**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY BOARD
BROADBAND TASK FORCE AGENDA**

County of Champaign, Urbana, Illinois
Monday, July 9, 2024 - 6:30 p.m.

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

MINUTES – Approved as Distributed

Members Present: Samantha Carter, Lorraine Cowart, M.C. Neal, , Mike Smith, Eric Thorsland, (Bailey Conrady & Mike Smeltzer-Zoom)

Members Absent: Stephanie Burnett & Jeff Wilson

Others Present: Michelle Jett (Director of Administration), Tim Arbeiter (Finley Engineering), Craig Hall-Zoom (Nextlink), Kaitlyn Kuzio (Grant Coordinator), and Elisabeth Dillingham (Recording Secretary)

Agenda Items

I. Call to Order

Ms. Carter called the meeting to order at 6:32p.m.

II. Roll Call

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

III. Approval of Agenda/Addendum

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

IV. Approval of Minutes

A. June 10, 2024

MOTION by Mr. Smith to approve the minutes of the June 10, 2024, meeting, seconded by Mr. Neal. 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. Presentation of Nextlink proposal, discussion, and vote on recommendation to the County Board

Mr. Craig Hall from Nextlink spoke via zoom regarding updates of their proposal. He apologized and indicated the timeline to prepare the proposal has been a challenge. He stated the proposed plan would focus on the rural eastern border of Champaign County and will provide fiber to many households. He believes it provides structure to expand later. The proposal includes a 19-mile path fiber plan ranging through Ogden, Royal, Homer and Sidney. He believes the FCC labels this area incorrectly as having

57 good service but allows satellite or a glitchy service to report that. He stated these towns do not have
58 fiber. He indicated these areas include 9,000-10,000 households and they can branch outward from the
59 towns to service more households. His proposal would cost 3.5 million dollars which leaves a balance
60 of 1.2 million dollars to decide where to allocate the rest of the funds to. He stated these areas are
61 underserved and they can use some of the ARDOF funds for the project. He estimated it will cost
62 \$35.00 a foot based on rock and soil conditions. The splice point to light up the fiber and get service to
63 the areas would be a potential arrangement with Great Plains Communications. Mr. Hall stated he has
64 not spoken to Great Plains regarding this proposal but have collaborated with them in the past. He
65 does not see that being a problem.

66
67 Mr. Neal asked if the 1.2-million-dollar estimate is for the 7300 locations in town only or does that
68 include the 1900 that are 100 meters from the middle mile.

69
70 Mr. Hall stated anything that extends out very far from the middle mile would need some additional
71 funding from the 1.2 million.

72
73 Mr. Neal then clarified the 1.2 million only services 7345 households in the aforementioned areas.

74
75 Mr. Hall stated a lot of his office was out for the holiday, therefore he apologizes he cannot give more
76 concrete answers.

77
78 Mr. Neal asked Mr. Hall what the estimated monthly recurring cost would be for the folks included in
79 the 7300-household figure.

80
81 Mr. Hall estimates the cheapest plan is about \$50.00 a month for 100 megabits and it can be increased
82 up towards \$70.00-\$80.00 per month.

83
84 Ms. Carter asked if the homes within 100 meters from the middle miles would receive service.

85
86 Mr. Hall stated the service is fiber, so they would have to lay a patch from the household out to the
87 main line. The further you are away from the grid, the less easy it is to include some of that in the
88 generic pricing.

89
90 Mr. Hall states from his best research, the four towns do not have fiber available to them.

91
92 Ms. Conrady asked Mr. Hall how this proposed route interacts with the preliminary project area units
93 (PAU's) that the office of Broadband has put out for the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment
94 Program (BEAD) granting process.

95
96 Mr. Hall replied that he does not what that does to overlay anything in this territory. He related he does
97 not know the answer to her question. He stated he believes the proposals put out by state and federal
98 groups come up with a population density in an area and determines who is underserved or unserved.
99 He believes those serve as guidance for providers to come up with a plan. He stated he has direct ties to
100 the FCC for census block data. He doesn't think they will step on anyone's toes when it comes to the
101 project he is proposing. Mr. Hall asked if that was why she asked that question.

102
103 Ms. Conrady advised Mr. Hall she was thinking about how we would potentially look at extending off
104 the middle mile if there was BEAD grant money available for these areas because they are part of the
105 PAU. Specifically, she was wondering how we extend the service and where would the money come
106 from.

107
108 Mr. Hall stated BEAD does prioritize fiber and he does not believe there is a conflict with his plan. He
109 explained expansion happens organically and when fiber is in place, people tap into it and write

110 collaborative arrangements between them if they are different companies. Anyone can apply to extend
111 fiber in the state or county.
112
113 Ms. Carter asked about eligibility for ARDOF funding in the four areas Mr. Hall presented.
114
115 Mr. Hall stated Nextlink has a large amount of ARDOF territory, and the funding is a subsidy that pays
116 a little bit of the bill for a group like Nextlink or Volo to build in that area over a number of years. That
117 means there is an obligation to build with the ARDOF money and while encouraging them to build in
118 the rural areas.
119
120 Mr. Neal asked about installation fees being charged to the homeowner or customers in rural areas
121 100 meters to 500 meters out.
122
123 Mr. Hall stated any customer stepping forward to have an installation done will have an installation
124 charge. He said there are times where they have special promotions, but he cannot make promises. If
125 the customer does not want to sign a contract for any period, the cost is \$250.00. If the customer is
126 willing to sign a contract, then the cost is \$150.00 whether they reside in town or 500 meters out of
127 town.
128
129 Ms. Carter asked if he could use the extra 1.2 million dollars could be used to offset the installation
130 charge.
131
132 Mr. Hall said he cannot find a reason you could not use the extra money with the ARPA funds. He was
133 unsure if there is an ethical dilemma. He stated the 1.2 million can be used for any project to further the
134 construction.
135
136 Mr. Smeltzer asked if any of the communities he spoke of are in his current ARDOF award.
137
138 Mr. Hall replied “no”, then added that Royal is an island out in the middle of “no service” and they
139 haven’t pushed into the area for ARDOF. The more southern area of the four communities have current
140 wireless service.
141
142 Mr. Smeltzer asked what the process is going forward and where is the money coming from.
143
144 Mr. Hall said the money is coming from ARPA funding.
145
146 Mr. Smeltzer asked if the proposal will leverage any other state or federal funds. He confirmed with
147 Mr. Hall that basically, Nextlink is combining their funds and the County’s AARPA funds together to
148 build the four counties.
149
150 Mr. Hall said Nextlink may be able to receive a monthly royalty check for the ARDOF award from the
151 state if they get into an area that they have not served.
152
153 Mr. Smeltzer confirmed this would be a simple deal only between Nextlink and the County and would
154 not involve the State of Illinois, Department of Commerce, or NTIA.
155
156 Mr. Hall stated that County full time staff present in the meeting would be better to answer him. He
157 said there might be some regulation on how to spend the funds and write the checks.
158
159 Mr. Smeltzer asked Mr. Hall if his company has given up on applying for additional funds through the
160 state. He stated the matching parts are sometimes 3,4,5, 6-7 times your funds to work with and to build
161 a project with if you are dealing with federal Broadband dollars which are channeled through the state.

162 Mr. Smeltzer added that it doesn't seem like we are leveraging anything other than spending money we
163 already have. He asked Mr. Hall if it is too late for them to get another award from the state or have
164 they given up.
165

166 Mr. Hall stated there is another round coming but they were denied for now, but it probably covers the
167 foreseeable future. Mr. Hall stated BEAD is coming and the state will not open funding back up until
168 BEAD is closed to prevent overlapping. He said there is nothing else he can leverage today to get a
169 project done with any other subsidiary.
170

171 Mr. Arbeiter from Finlay Consultants stated there are no current active funding options. The next active
172 one is BEAD Connect Illinois Four, unknown date of deployment. The state discontinued accepting
173 applications for previous programs. He asked Mr. Hall if this area matches up to what was partitioned
174 for Nextlink.
175

176 Mr. Hall stated he did not put the proposal together, so he does not know.
177

178 Mr. Arbeiter stated he needs confirmation to ensure the area he is proposing falls into the area that is
179 grant eligible under the memorandum of understanding. He cautioned Mr. Hall that he cannot mingle
180 and receive benefit from both ARPA and ARDOF funds together. He asked Mr. Hall what the
181 Nextlink dollar commitment is to this project.
182

183 Mr. Hall stated he cannot be accurate with a total project amount considering the pathways, towns, cost
184 per foot, and the household count with what the other pieces are.
185

186 Mr. Neal asked if they can't use the ARDOF funds in these areas, is that going to sway their decision
187 moving forward, including the money he was hoping the County would put towards the project with
188 them not being able to capitalize on ARDOF.
189

190 Mr. Hall said if it is a conflict, they must either speak up and say something or give up the ARDOF
191 sections. He added that all these things can change how that happens.
192

193 Ms. Jett asked Mr. Arbeiter to confirm that long term, these areas do not cross over with Volo's
194 territory and that these areas fall within future BEAD funding. She also asked if we could continue to
195 apply for these funds in the future.
196

197 Mr. Arbeiter stated a couple of the communities were outside of the grant eligible area. The State of
198 Illinois pulls in grant eligible layers. The FCC just released the newest data a few weeks ago but it takes
199 a month or so to update. The goal was to leverage a match for the areas the state was deeming eligible.
200 He stated his biggest concern is that he needs to see the full financial ask regarding the County and
201 Nextlinks contributions.
202

203 Ms. Carter explained that a vote was to take place based upon the presentation Mr. Hall presented this
204 evening, but the Broadband Task Force does not have all the information they need.
205

206 Mr. Arbeiter advised the Taskforce to determine if you feel you have enough information to make a
207 decision. If it is unclear, decide what you need. He added that the Taskforce needs to have their
208 questions answered.
209

210 Ms. Conrad asked Mr. Hall what his verification process was to confirm these communities do not
211 already have fiber. She added that she believes fiber had gone into Ogden at one time.
212

213 Mr. Hall replied that he had looked at a couple different databases to verify who did not have fiber
214 service. One was with the FCC in which he selected a certain type of technology in a certain area which
215 came up with results.

216
217 Mr. Hall suggested meeting again to answer all the unanswered questions to come up with a plan.

218
219 Ms. Jett clarified information regarding the process. She spoke of the good faith effort clause and re-
220 evaluation in the contract when Nextlink did not receive the BEAD funding. The board listened to the
221 presentation of alternative wireless access point last month. The Taskforce wanted a proposal that was
222 mostly fiber before the July County Board meeting. They wanted time to review it and have a
223 recommendation to the Taskforce if something needed changed. This evening, the quality of the
224 proposal was disappointing as it has left a lot of major questions that are up in the air which makes it
225 difficult for the Taskforce to make a choice. Choices moving forward would be to:

- 226
227 1) Wait and not decide tonight.
228 2) List out the specific questions tonight and wait another month for the proposal to be flushed out
229 more to re-draft the contract to be accurate.
230 3) Decide if we feel there is a different direction that needs to be investigated which needs to be
231 sooner than later to allocate the money by the end of the year.
232 4) Lastly, if we want to stay on this path, that is an option.
233 5) If you feel we have done due diligence in consideration, we can do that as well.

234
235 Finally, Ms. Jett advised the Taskforce that we need some direction to move forward so we do not lose
236 our ARPA money if we don't have the money allocated.

237
238 Ms. Carter asked each Taskforce member how they wish to proceed.

239
240 Mr. Smith stated he wishes to go down the Broadband path while it is not vetted to the degree to what
241 towns will receive the 4.7 million, this is what the Taskforce was created for.

242
243 Ms. Carter agrees to move forward as well.

244
245 Mr. Neal agrees to move forward.

246
247 Mr. Thorsland stated the proposal does not feel fully inflated and he requests more detail regarding the
248 fiber proposal. He indicated they can have another Taskforce meeting and if they like what they see,
249 they can update the contract. He tentatively supports moving forward with more detail.

250
251 Mr. Neal asked if they could possibly shorten the process instead of including another provider. He
252 suggested asking Volo to give them a proposal on how they would utilize the 4.7 million dollars.

253
254 Ms. Jett advised the Taskforce that you cannot ask for Volo's proposal while entertaining Nextlink's
255 proposal. A decision must be made on the Nextlink proposal prior to asking Volo what they can do
256 with the funds.

257
258 Mr. Hall stated Ms. Jett told him last month that there is a stipulation in the contract that they must give
259 Nextlink an opportunity to come back with a different proposal. He compared it to a first right of
260 refusal clause. Mr. Hall stated he does not want to hold the County up and they will back out of the
261 contract if the County wants to move in a new direction or ask Volo for a proposal.

262
263 Ms. Jett stated they are absolutely honoring the contract they have with Nextlink. She added that if
264 Nextlink is feeling a change in potential vision or commitment as to what can be done, they will also
265 need to revise the program. She is unsure if it can be extended into 2026. The best-case scenario would

266 be to have the ability to talk to Nextlink and Volo at the same time. This would require a written
267 release from Nextlink. She is happy to follow up with Mr. Hall. The bigger question is, given the new
268 financial circumstances, does Nextlink truly want to do this project? If not, it is understandable but
269 there needs to be a conversation to ensure the money is used to get the best fiber to the most people in
270 the County.

271
272 Mr. Hall stated they wouldn't have put a proposal together if they didn't want to help. Since they have
273 some gaps in what they thought, versus what they know with ARDOF and the other territorial issues.
274 He does not want to compete against himself, but he is willing to step away and help with a new
275 direction if that is what is best for the County. Mr. Hall stated the timeline is what is giving them the
276 problem. Mr. Hall indicated a third party he was relying on for the proposal has held them up and they
277 have a blemish attempting to put something together so quickly. In good faith, they would love to iron
278 out the details or if the County does not want to move in this direction, he would be fine if we want to
279 ask Volo for their availability.

280
281 Ms. Cowart stated this was her first meeting. She said it seems to her that Nextlink is not up to par for
282 doing the project due to the time frame. She feels if we want to stay with Volo, we should do it now
283 before we grant Nextlink their request. She is not in favor of moving forward with Nextlink until the
284 board receives more answers.

285
286 Mr. Thorsland stated a fresh pair of eyes is sometimes important to come into something in the middle
287 of a process. He wishes we could speak to both companies at the same time.

288
289 Ms. Jett proposed for Mr. Arbiter and Mr. Hall to work together to answer the questions we have on the
290 existing proposal. She added we need to add a time frame of this Taskforce being able to hear that
291 proposal early to mid-August. She will speak with Andrew in the civil division, along with Mr. Hall to
292 secure the appropriate legal release for us to also reach out to Volo and ask them to prepare a proposal
293 too. We can consider those options in August at the same meeting at the same time.

294
295 Mr. Thorsland was pleased with Ms. Jett's proposal.

296
297 Mr. Smeltzer strongly urged the Taskforce not to move forward with the Nextlink proposal. He
298 reiterated you must know the territory for the places on the list. He stated Pavlov Media, a company
299 headquartered in Champaign, is building fiber for all the communities on Nextlinks list. He said that
300 would be easy information to locate if they were doing in-depth research. Pavlov media is not unknown
301 and has been around for awhile and he believes they have been out building fiber in all four of the
302 communities. He asked if the County wants to spend their money putting a second fiber provider within
303 some of the county when the rest of the county has nothing or do we want to find places that aren't in
304 the process of being served with existing providers with their own money. Pavlov Media was a
305 contender for the project and was not selected. They are using their own money to provide the services.
306 He feels this information was not well researched and we should not go forward with this in any way.

307
308 Ms. Carter added that I3 Broadband is introducing services in District 6 installing fiber optic cable that
309 has not occurred before. She does not know if this would be included with the plans for the affordable
310 housing community areas. She stated she has a lot more questions and she would not feel comfortable
311 voting yes tonight.

312
313 Mr. Hall's presentation lacked the detail the Broadband Taskforce needed to make an informed
314 decision on Nextlinks proposal and to present the proposal to the County Board in July. The consensus
315 was to continue the discussion in August.

316
317
318

319 **VIII. Other Business**
320 A. Date of next meeting-August 5, 2024 - 6:30 p.m.

321
322 **IX. Chair's Report**
323 There was no Chair's Report.

324
325 **X. Adjournment**
326 Ms. Carter adjourned the meeting at 7:47 p.m.

327
328
329 *Please note the minutes reflect the order of the agenda and may not necessarily reflect the order of business*
330 *conducted at the meeting.*