



**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY BOARD
BROADBAND TASK FORCE AGENDA**

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

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

MINUTES – Approved as Amended on December 17, 2024

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

Members Absent: Jeff Wilson, Craig Hall- (Nextlink)

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

Agenda Items

I. Call to Order

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

IV. Approval of Minutes

A. July 9, 2024

MOTION by Mr. Thorsland to approve the minutes of the July 9, 2024, meeting, seconded by Mr. Smith. Upon voice vote, the **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

V. Public Participation

Mark Sheldon, Vice President of Government and Community Relations for Pavlov Media, presented a grant proposal for expanding Broadband access to utilize the remaining Champaign County ARPA funds. His plan includes a combination of aerial and underground fiber.

Ms. Carter asked what the color codes indicate on the map Mr. Sheldon provided.

Mr. Sheldon stated everything that is colored coded is a BEAD eligible area. He added it is critical for people to know the broadband service locations have not been published by the State of Illinois yet.

VI. Communications

There were no communications.

Ms. Conrady ceded the floor for Mr. Smeltzer who appeared for the meeting on Zoom. He explained the County is basically divided into two categories by the federal government. They are either BEAD

eligible homes and businesses or non-BEAD eligible homes and businesses. The ARPA funding can be spent in either of these two categories. The 4.7 million dollars should be spent in the non-BEAD areas since there will not be additional future funding. He suggested that when the Taskforce looks at the proposals, the presenters should likely discuss how much is BEAD eligible and how much is not. He reiterated the ARPA money must be dedicated soon or we may lose it. He closed by saying the ARPA money should be spent in the non-BEAD areas.

Mr. Neal asked Mr. Arbeiter's perspective on the non-BEAD eligible approach presented by Mr. Smeltzer.

Mr. Arbeiter joined the meeting on Zoom and stated we would have to originate back to the RFI that was originally posted. He explained the ARPA definition covers areas which are underserved that are not receiving a wireline connection of at least 25/3. He stated the County ARPA funds must be obligated by the end of this year and the projects completed with the funds spent by the end of 2026.

VII. New Business

A. Nextlink Proposal-No one was present in person or via Zoom for Nextlink.

B. VOLO Proposal-Mr. Folk presented the Volo proposal. He focused on the mission of the Taskforce by utilizing ideas presented throughout the process. He stated they are focusing 100% of the funds for non-Bead eligible premises and the other existing agreements that would carry through with the County. He noted Nextlink was under obligation to most of the ARDOF areas in the County. Most of these areas are no longer eligible for Connect Illinois funding due to Nextlink's own deployment of fixed wireless.

Volo's portion of the County was originally the central half of the County that consisted of slightly more than 1,836 unserved or underserved premises. In the inter-mapping process with the state, they nailed down that award number to 2,262. With updated eligibility rules, at least 568 of the 2,262 will become ineligible for Connect Illinois funding. The 568 is a group of people they are attempting to resolve with the proposal. Volo's goal is to focus on the entire County, but it will take some time. Lastly, local providers are serving the smaller towns. The true rural customers are the hardest to serve and he hopes to focus on spending the funding to help those areas. He related he is hoping to expand his central area to serve an additional 329 premises. There are no County funds that go into these units. Volo and State of Illinois funds will be used. Volo funds, neighborhood matching funds, and County ARPA funds will be used to make fiber service available to an additional 568 BEAD ineligible premises in the northern half and 372 in the southern half Champaign County. These premises are outside of VOLO's footprint and are ineligible for BEAD and not on any roadmap to be serviced by anyone else. Volo will continue to extend that coverage over the next five years which will hit all the areas the plan was originated to service. He indicated they will continue to work cohesively with other providers to minimize costs while avoiding duplicating infrastructure and overbuilding. They will continue updating the County and the Taskforce with their progress until the problem is solved. He estimates the County's return on investment is 2,269 projected additional premises. This is right in line with what the state projected to see.

Ms. Jett asked what the timeline is with the additional funding and additional premises.

Mr. Folk stated the projects would be done in parallel with the existing project with a 2025 completion date or midpoint 2026.

Mr. Folk stated Volo will be using a lot of their own funds and believes this is a great investment for the County.

- C. **Community List Discussion**- Mr. Smeltzer discussed the detailed list he created to show what providers are serving which communities. He stated the private sector has stepped up and gotten things done over the past few years. He related it is a good deal if Volo has a plan for dealing with those that are not in the high-density areas.

Ms. Conrady asked for the Taskforce opinions on the presentations.

Mr. Thorsland appreciates Mr. Smeltzer's communication. He is happy with Volo's presentation and their mission. He is comfortable recommending VOLO to the County Board and appreciates Pavlov's presentation.

Mr. Neal stated it is a bit difficult deciding on a last-minute presentation. He supports and would like to go with Volo as their presentation appears solid.

Ms. Carter likes both Pavlov and Volo's presentation. She would like to see them work together.

Ms. Jett asked Mr. Sheldon about his proposal for aerial fiber and comparison to Volo's presentation.

Mr. Sheldon stated he was told there was no stipulation when he reviewed the amended contract. He read Volo's proposal, and it does not specify the type of Broadband, specifically aerial or underground. He stated aerial is cheaper. His presentation consists of both.

Ms. Jett asked Mr. Sheldon if his proposal services 782 people with underground fiber.

Mr. Sheldon stated they wanted to connect the towns that did not have any service connecting service. Aerial fiber covers 5-10 homes per mile.

Mr. Smelter clarified the difference between aerial and underground fiber. He stated underground is much better due to less maintenance. Aerial operating costs are more expensive and eventually, those costs flow down to the customer. Aerial fiber is more susceptible to go down due to damage from wind, ice storms, squirrels, and clearance issues with farm equipment. Aerial fiber would be a bad operational decision for the County. Mr. Smeltzer stated the vision of the Taskforce has always been buried fiber for every inch of the project.

Mr. Sheldon stated the strands for the County would be underground, not aerial.

Mr. Folk stated Volo dislikes aerial and they avoid it like the plague. Mr. Folk stated he prefers underground fiber.

Ms. Jett clarified the project that will be using County funding would not use aerial at all.

Mr. Folk confirmed Ms. Jett is correct. Mr. Folk stated they have no plans to use aerial fiber. The only way aerial fiber would be used is if there is a wall they cannot get around. Additionally, the only way aerial would be used is if the engineers come back and say they located a wall that goes forever deep and cannot get around it. Volo would try to get around it and use the aerial as a last resort. Mr. Folk said they would much rather go around than go over on a project. He used the Boneyard Project as an example. They bored under the Boneyard and had 27-foot steel pylons on the side of it, but they went under them because it is better than going over them.

Ms. Conrady thanked all present. She stated the commitment has always been to serve the rural residents. Private industry is taking care of the small towns. She still has people asking her about fiber in rural Sadorus and rural Penfield by Middle Fork. She appreciates Volo's commitment getting out to those customers while using their own revenue to continue to build out to those folks. She is

deeply concerned that Nextlink's ARDOF funds and projects may not happen. The amount of money coming from BEAD will probably take care of those non-BEAD areas as well. The other areas that are not covered that are limited to fixed wireless are the areas we need to address. She thanked Mr. Sheldon from Pavlov Media for his presentation. She prefers to go with VOLO to receive the remaining money from the County. Ms. Conrady asked if there was a motion.

MOTION by Mr. Smith for Volo to continue with the 4.7 million dollars still available to build out the County and seconded by Mr. Neal. Upon voice vote, **MOTION CARRIED** unanimously.

Mr. Smeltzer agreed with the sentiment but clarified he could not vote as he was attending the meeting via Zoom.

Ms. Jett introduced Champaign County Grant Coordinator, Kait Kuzio to the Taskforce and advised the Taskforce to contact her if they have BEAD, grant, or general questions. Ms. Jett explained they are interested in finding ways to continue funding and support options after the initial money is gone.

Mr. Reverand Barnes was present in the audience and asked if the UC2B junction box in Dobbins Downs area can be utilized to connect fiber to the neighborhood.

Paul Hixson, the current co-chair of UC2B board was present on Zoom and spoke about UC2B partnering with I3 Broadband for the buildup and build out of the urban communities including digital equity inclusion areas. This includes residents of all races, financially strained homes, language barriers, and immigration status. He believes there will be more progress in the Dobbins Downs area as there is an interest to do so County wide.

Mr. Smelter stated this is simple for VOLO to address. They have an open access agreement with UC2B, there is backbone fiber there if Volo wants to build out the Dobbins Downs neighborhoods. All areas immediately outside of the city limits of Champaign-Urbana have now become Volo's opportunity and obligation.

Mr. Folk stated there are a few dots in that area that are unserved and underserved. For those areas, he is hoping to be obligated by the state. Comcast is already in those areas. If I3 is not interested in building fiber there, it is something Volo would certainly be interested in looking at for development.

Ms. Conrady encouraged everyone to thank Congresswoman Budzinski and her staff as she has introduced a bill to try and get the ACP, (Affordability Connectivity Program) up and running.

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 7:38 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.