

BROADBAND COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES – FINAL VERSION
Johnson Municipal Building
Wednesday, July 24, 2019

Present:

Broadband Committee Members: Charles Gallanter, Charlotte Reber, Rob Rodriguez, Robin Story

1. Call to Order

Charles called the meeting to order 6:35 PM.

2. Broadband Survey

Robin said that the broadband survey put together by Una for the last meeting is ready. If the committee adopts it, she can put together the Filemaker database so people can fill it out on an iPad and the committee can collect responses. Since she was the only committee member available for any Tuesday nights, Robin volunteered use of her iPad and said that she could set up a table there and collect responses through Una's online survey on August 20th and August 27th.

Charlotte asked if there were still any plans to make the survey available to people at the Johnson Public Library as well. Robin said she would talk to Jean Engle about making it available there. Rob asked if a link to the survey could be put on the town's webpage. Charles wasn't sure. Rob will also put a posting linking to the survey in Front Porch Forum.

3. Demo Mile Project

Charles asked for Rob to clarify the situation with the Demo Mile project. He said that there was a public meeting on May 29 to discuss the Demo Mile project, in which MC Fiber would install a 1.25 miles of fiber on French Hill and part of Grow Road. Rob, Robin, and several members of MC Fiber were in attendance, as well as a number of residents from that area. MC Fiber said the project would install a first mile of fiber, six hookups, and a hub station. The setup would cost \$25,000, of which MC Fiber was able to cover half. A resident of the area who attended the meeting stated an interest in investing in the project, and Rob offered to cover the remaining balance. 12 people signed up with MC Fiber at the meeting.

Rob says that following the meeting, MC Fiber contacted him to say that they had mapped the addresses of the people who had signed up and found that in order to include them all, the Demo Mile project would have to cover four miles, not one mile. Rob contacted Brian Story and arranged a meeting with himself, Brian, and three members of MC Fiber to discuss possible use of the revolving loan fund in order to cover the extended four-mile area. They are still waiting to hear back on whether the funding will be granted.

Robin said that the revolving loan fund is just for Johnson businesses, and that the funding probably wouldn't be approved because MC Fiber is not a Johnson business. Rob said that in the

meeting, Brian said that fiber fits with the mission of the town, but that the loan is regulated at the state level.

Robin asked if the Demo Mile hub would be able to cover all of Johnson for the Last Mile project. Rob said that his understanding is that the hub can only cover 15 miles, maybe 20, before the signal becomes too weak, so no, it could not cover all of Johnson.

Robin read a prepared message from Una in absentia in which Una outlined her concerns with the broadband committee committing to MC Fiber. Robin said that she agreed with Una's reservations, and that while MC Fiber was not a bad option, she still didn't want the committee to lock the town into an agreement with them.

Charlotte asked Rob to clarify the terminology of the Demo Mile, since the naming might imply that it's the Broadband Committee's demo project, when in fact it is completely independent of the committee. Rob said that he's not sure where the naming originated, but that it's a demo in both the sense that Johnson is learning whether MC Fiber is a good fit for the town, and MC Fiber is learning whether they would want to do further business in Johnson.

Rob said he has since heard that some people feel it is a conflict of interest for him to be on both the Broadband Committee and living at an address that would be covered by the Demo Mile. Robin said that the problem is the perception that the revolving loan fund is being used by the Broadband Committee co-chair to finance his own access to fiber.

Rob clarified that even if the revolving loan funding were approved, the funds would not be going towards the initial 1.25 miles in the Demo Mile project which includes his residence. The initial 1.25 mile Demo Mile project would be funded by MC Fiber, another resident of the area, and himself out of his own pocket. He said he got involved with the Demo Mile project because he wanted to get the ball rolling on fiber, and that he feels it is a success since it has already raised so much interest.

Robin said that the original Demo Mile, which covers committee co-chair Rob's house, is being funded entirely privately without any use of the revolving loan fund. However, the Demo Mile has inspired expansion into surrounding areas that has resulted in discussion about using the revolving loan fund. Rob approaching Brian with MC Fiber is the result of expanded interest not, seeking self-funding. The revolving fund will not be used for the Demo Mile.

Charles said that the committee currently has no position with regard to the Demo Mile project, and is not making recommendations one way or the other. MC Fiber are the ones approaching the town about funding, not the Broadband Committee. The Demo Mile project will be happening regardless of whether the revolving loan fund is used.

4. Municipal Fiber Discussion

Robin brought up the discussion from the previous meeting about municipal fiber as an alternative to MC Fiber, meaning fiber as a utility run by the Electric Co-op or by Johnson Water and Light. She said who would manage it as a utility partly depends on the town/village merger

question, which makes it difficult for the committee to progress on this discussion. Rob said that Johnson Water and Light is just village, not town. He's not sure how it works with the Co-Op.

Robin said the Broadband Committee's mission is last mile broadband coverage in Johnson, and that she is reluctant to commit to a company such as MC Fiber because there is no way to get them to solemnly pinky swear to uphold the committee's goals. Rob asked if anyone else on the committee had signed MC Fiber's NDA agreement in order to read their proposal. No one else present had. Robin said that a proposal isn't a promise.

Charles said that Fletcher, VT is committing to MC Fiber, and wanted to know if there was anyone there the committee had contact with. Robin said that the committee had access to the town administration of Fletcher, and confirmed that they were going 100% in on MC Fiber. Charlotte suggested that Fletcher would provide an excellent demo case for MC Fiber's level of support.

Rob said that according to MC Fiber, Stowe Cable runs over French Hill, but that if MC Fiber supported Johnson, they would actually come through Waterville from Fletcher, because it would be less expensive for them.

Robin and Charlotte both expressed reservations with MC Fiber's stated goal of not competing with Comcast, which would mean that even if they committed to bringing last mile coverage to Johnson, Main Street and 100C would be their lowest and last priority. Charles said he's more worried about them covering the dark areas that currently have no coverage. Robin said that a municipal fiber would remove the Comcast competition problem, since it would be a utility.

Charles asked whether municipal fiber would be able to receive town funding. Robin said yes. Rob asked wouldn't that cause the town to be funding itself? Robin said this funding would come in the form of bonds, not the revolving loan fund. Charles said that municipal fiber would also guarantee other committee goals such as net neutrality and data privacy.

Charles said he is okay with MC Fiber as an interim solution for Johnson. Robin agreed, but said she didn't want Johnson to get trapped between MC Fiber and Comcast as dueling monopolies.

Charlotte said that if Fletcher can provide an example of a town committing to last mile with MC Fiber, is there another town that can provide an example of how municipal fiber worked out? Robin said that Fletcher is actually a slightly different case because they don't have any Comcast coverage there, removing the competition problem. Charles said that EC Fiber is municipal, it started in Royalton but then expanded. Charlotte asked whether something similar might ever happen with Johnson, where municipal fiber starts here and then expands to include other towns. Robin suggested that if it were a business, this could even lead to Johnson pulling in a profit. Rob said it wouldn't work that way, that as a utility Johnson wouldn't be making money off it quite like a business.

Robin asked whether the revolving fund could be used to start a business in Johnson to provide fiber. Charles said this would just lead to the same problem as committing to MC Fiber, in that Johnson is now locked in business with a single company. Robin said that at least this way it

would be a local company providing local jobs. Rob said that wouldn't necessarily be the case, citing EC Fiber as an example since they subcontracted all their work.

Charles expressed concerns that if MC Fiber defaulted while partway through the Last Mile project, Comcast or anyone could pick up the fiber and lock Johnson out. He proposed having Stowe Cable co-sign the loan, to guarantee they'd pick it up even if MC Fiber folded.

5. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 7:25.