

TOWN OF BRATTLEBORO

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February 11, 2020

Memo To: Brattleboro Selectboard
Memo Via: Peter B. Elwell, Town Manager
Memo From: Patrick Moreland, Assistant Town Manager
Re: Communication Union Districts

Recommendation: To appoint Assistant Town Manager Patrick Moreland to serve as Brattleboro's representative to the Windham Regional Commission's Communication Union District planning initiative.

Project Background & Update

The Windham Regional Commission (WRC) has been awarded a \$60,000 Broadband Innovation Grant from the Vermont Department of Public Service (DPS) to explore the potential for establishing a Communications Union District(s) (CUD). The project, which is expected to take just six months, began in January and will focus on two key issues, determining feasibility and developing a business plan. A summary sheet developed by the WRC is attached. Sue Westa, a Senior Planner with WRC and project manager for the Windham Region Broadband Project, will attend the February 18 Selectboard meeting and discuss the project with the Board.

The primary obligation of participating municipalities is to facilitate the distribution of the Take Rate Survey. The survey is being developed by one of WRC's project partners, Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc. The survey will be available online and links to that online survey will be added to Brattleboro's website and pushed out on social media. In addition, paper copies will be made available in Town offices, at the library and at the Gibson Aiken Center. A postcard will also be sent to every mail recipient in Brattleboro detailing where to find the survey and inviting them to direct questions to the Town Manager's Office.

Appoint Representative

The WRC has asked participating towns to designate a single point of contact. Assistant Town Manager Patrick Moreland has been participating in CUD meetings based on the Board's previous direction on October 15, 2019 that staff participate in regional CUD discussions. Staff recommends that the Selectboard formalize that prior direction by officially designating Patrick Moreland as the Town's point of contact for the project.



Windham Region Broadband Project

SUMMARY SHEET

The Windham Regional Commission (WRC) and its partners, ValleyNet and Rural Innovation Strategies Inc. (RISI) were awarded a Broadband Innovation Grant (BIG) from the state's Department of Public Service in late December 2019. The resulting Windham Region Broadband Project was informed by the hard work of many town broadband committees and other volunteer efforts, as well as education and outreach organized by the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation.

WRC understands the importance of high-quality, high-speed and reliable internet access to our communities for many reasons – connecting students with teachers and online education resources, connecting patients with medical providers, connecting rural businesses with clients and employers with employees, as well as for entertainment and news. Broadband can provide that level of service to Windham Region communities that are currently unserved and underserved.

The Windham Region Broadband Project involves a two-step process, as laid out in the BIG grant: 1) development of a feasibility study, and 2) development of a business plan. The goal of the feasibility study is to determine the interest and need for broadband development throughout the region and the best way to implement that development. Towns have been asked to pass a simple resolution confirming their participation as well as appointing a broadband contact person.

A key component of the feasibility study is a community survey. WRC has asked towns to distribute surveys about their broadband needs, and ability and willingness to pay for service to their citizens. Online and paper surveys (and flyers) are available on WRC's website, as well as at town halls, libraries, community centers and other gathering places. This information is essential to the development of the feasibility study and an actionable business plan.

The feasibility study will look at the use of Communications Union Districts (CUDs) which have been used to implement broadband in other regions. The feasibility plan will identify how many and what CUDs make the most sense to provide region-wide broadband coverage based on geography and existing services. The CUD model is especially useful in rural areas to engage a critical mass to provide this infrastructure in underserved areas.

The entire project will be completed within six months. The primary project contact at WRC is Sue Westa, swesta@windhamregional.org. Please contact her for more information or if you have questions or see the project website www.windhamregional.org/broadband.