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ConnectME Authority Meeting Notes - June 16, 2011

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ConnectME Authority

June 16, 2011 – Meeting Notes

I. Introductions

Authority Members: Dick Thompson, Acting Chair; Vendean Vafiades; Greg McNeal
Staff: Phil Lindley, Lisa Leahy

II. Broadband Needs Assessment – Sewall Company

James Page, Sewall Company, provided a detailed review of the recently completed Needs Assessment (see slide presentation). This Needs Assessment is one deliverable in the ConnectME Authority's Broadband Planning Project. It establishes a baseline measure of broadband availability and use in Maine, and identifies barriers to the adoption of broadband technologies throughout the State. It will be used to plan the Authority's ongoing activities and strategies for increasing broadband awareness and uptake, and to provide the baseline against which such implemented strategies can be evaluated.

The primary barriers to broadband adoption are lack of perceived value or need (both for computer use and broadband) and price. The Assessment also shows that Maine is on the wrong side of demographic factors that drive broadband use: ranking high in those areas that retard use and low in those areas that accelerate use.

Data acquisition for the Needs Assessment was extensive. Twenty-eight service providers were directly surveyed; nearly 11,000 households (26% return) and over 3,500 businesses (17% return) received mailed surveys; direct surveys were also conducted with Maine's tribal entities and community anchor institutions.

The Needs Assessment will be used in conjunction with the mapping and inventory project data that is the data set for our statewide broadband availability map. While the data that is supplied by the service providers improves with each round of submissions, gaps in accuracy continue to be a concern. Some providers over estimate their broadband coverage, while others underestimate coverage. It is the best data available and is what is currently used by other states and the FCC.

Recommendations from the Needs Assessment:

- The Authority consider expanding its focus from unserved residential consumers to include businesses, agencies, and community anchor institutions in order to coordinate better planning and growth.

- The Authority lead a sustained marketing campaign that builds awareness on the benefits of broadband adoption and that focuses on groups with low adoption rates.
- The Authority work more closely with service providers to build incentives that increase awareness and adoption.
- The Authority work with State government to encourage regulatory reform more attuned to current technologies and business requirements.

III. Broadband Sustainability Fund

The Authority approved the draft request for funds prepared by Ben Sanborn, TAM. The Broadband Sustainability Fund (BBSF) is a new fund created when the Maine Fiber Company (MFC) Three Ring Binder Project was approved by the Legislature. The fund is funded by a monthly fee assessed on fibers owned by MFC that are purchased, leased, or used. The BBSF is for the use of ILECs to build out broadband service in unserved areas of their territory and allocated to those areas based on where the lit fibers are located. Based on the statutory language, and with proper certification, the Authority has minimal discretion to make the funds available. After a meeting with Authority staff, Ben Sanborn volunteered to craft the first draft of the request for funds. The final version will be posted on the Authority website.

IV. Sixth Grant Round Status

Thirty-three pre-application letters were received, one project was withdrawn because of duplication, and another will be revised for the application. The grant applications will be due July 13, 2011. The grant awards will be made at the next Authority meeting, July 20th. While the schedule and timing are similar to the last grant round, a few potential applicants expressed concern about the compressed schedule. Applicants can request additional time if necessary, but the Authority is concerned that projects know as soon as possible about available funding.

V. Executive Director Report

The Executive Director provided current financial reports.

VI. Public Comment Period

Emma Lishness, MFC, stated that segments of the Three Ring Binder necessary to provide service to grant projects will be ready as necessary.