

10-Year Telecommunications Plan – Final Draft Hearing Transcript

The following is the transcript from the public hearing held on May 1st, 2024, in St. Albans, Vermont, where the Public Service Department presented the final draft of the 10-Year Telecommunications Plan.

Wed, May 01, 2024 5:30PM

Alex Kelley

All right. Welcome. Everyone to this presentation of the 2024 tenure telecommunications plan. My name is Alex Kelley. I'm part of the team that supported the Public Service Department in creating this plan. Right now I'm going to present some highlights from this plan. But I highly encourage everyone to look at the full document which is posted on the Public Service department's website. While I'll be able to hit some highlights here, obviously, the plan and its full detail is where the bulk of the information is. After I do a quick presentation, we will take further public comment if you have anything you want to share without any further ado. Okay, there we go. Harlie, I just requested control the screen, let me know when I'm good to proceed.

Alex Kelley

Oh, here's the buttons down here. Okay. There we go. Great. All right. I'm gonna give you a little bit of context on the plan this year, the 2024 plan, and I'll talk you through some of the research and analysis we did. I'll review some of the changes we made to the plan since the previous version because we've received substantial public feedback that was very, very useful, very productive. And then I'll go through some of the findings and recommendations. And so the context of the 2024 plan is guided by statute. I think we're all aware of that statute 202 C 30 VSA 202 D as well, says the process. Importantly, this moment in time, this 2024 plan was created to build on the momentum created by substantial federal resources that came to the state for broadband deployment, including ARPA funds, CPF funds and the ongoing broadband equity access and deployment funds. The plan addresses all the statutory requirements, but it also places a special focus on elements that are not addressed in the simultaneous planning that is being done as part of the B program. So the BT program is mandated by the federal government. This plan can't supersede that, that work. And so we've for the sake of smart use of resources, we've focused this plan on elements that that plan does not cover.

Alex Kelley

So this plan has a lot of research that went into it. We did a wide survey of landline and cell phones to come up with a statistically significant sampling of residents. We did an online survey of many different sectors businesses, health care, public safety. We did interviews with over 55 public and private stakeholders. We did a statewide mobile engineering and coverage analysis. And we did an input output workforce gap analysis based on the construction spending we expect to happen in the state to understand whether the state's current

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Department of Public Service
112 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05620-2601
<http://public.service.vermont.gov>

[phone] 802-828-2811
[fax] 802-828-2342
[tdd] 800-734-8390

broadband construction workforce will meet the needs of all the work that has to be done. All right. So we also have been in the middle of and this is part of robust public participation. process. We put we advertise the public participation opportunities on WCA X. We held three public hearings with remote options in March with sign language translation, which again, we have tonight. We did a lot of outreaches via email to interviewees and other stakeholders encouraging them to review the plan. There was a dedicated email address set up to receive comments on the plan through the public service department's website. We've worked we've done collaborative publicity and distribution with the HMOs in the state, and we received over 50 pages of feedback during the public comment period, all of which will be included in the file is included in the final draft of the plan with comments based on the public service departments, changes and responses to those comments. Now I'm not going to necessarily go through line by line, but I can say that there isn't a single section in the plan that I think didn't change to some degree between the preliminary draft and the final draft based on public comments. Very grateful to everyone who participated, it made the work product a lot better. And so we're just again thankful for everyone who submitted comments and who will submit comments in the course of these hearings.

Alex Kelley

First, fiber coverage is expanding rapidly, rapidly. In the state. I think many of us know this. But the interviews and analysis we did surface some small challenges with the fiber deployment process that we think the state can tackle. You know, a big challenge that we documented is the fact that the broadband construction workforce will really need to grow to handle all the work over the next five years. There's also a kind of ongoing concern across different stakeholders in the state about the fiber deployment that is going to be followed and, in some cases, accompanied by infrastructure owners burying their network in the next 10 to 15 years as part of utility hardening. And we also noted that the agency of transportation was issuing right of way application fee waivers actually stopped doing that. Recently, which is adding costs to the deployment of broadband in the unserved areas before that exercise is complete. So, on the mobile wireless front, our analysis showed that, you know, first of all, it's not unsurprising that stakeholders really think this is critical and critical to improving the state business. A substantial number of businesses said that the wireless coverage is not adequate for their business needs. And the majority of residents agreed that the state should use public funds to improve mobile wireless coverage. You know, in looking at historical data compared with the most recent data available from 2022, the download speeds have increased quite substantially across the state the average speeds that people can use, get on their phones. However, coverage expansion has not happened. nearly the same degree and in fact, there there's very few very little evidence of increased coverage around the state. However, if you'll if you look in the plan, you will see that there's a substantial amount of engineering we did that showed that strategically placed small wireless facilities, which are 50 feet tall or less, can make significant progress towards closing the mobile wireless service gaps. We we analyze this because those types of facilities are much easier to get set up they're easier for a number of reasons. And so this underpins our recommendation to pursue a mobile wireless

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[fax] 802-828-2342
[tdd] 800-734-8390

deployment program that focuses on these types of wireless facilities which are easier to nestle into the environment. They are less, less prominent, less notable and yet can still create a meaningful increase in coverage. Affordability was a significant concern amongst people we spoke to for the plan. The Affordable connectivity program was the federal program that provided \$30 a month to qualified low-income Vermonters expired in April. Congress didn't refund it, which is causing about 24,000 Vermonters to lose this subsidy. So you know another big theme through the plan. And the work we did was that stakeholders strongly noted that both fixed and mobile connectivity are equally important. Alright fixed being the service you can get at your home and mobile being the service you can get via cell phone or device on the go. That being said the affordable connectivity program only provided the subsidy for one service even though both of them are critical. And health care workers in particular noted that unhoused Vermonters and housing insecure Vermonters really needed that mobile device and mobile connectivity to access care and be and that was their lifeline to services and coverage. And so affordability for that population with a mobile device and a mobile service plan was particularly important in the Public Safety Department, you know, in parallel to the creation of this plan, a public safety communications task force was established to evaluate the a number of public safety communications questions including whether or not the state should work to consolidate different public and public safety answering points. So that was a we hope that the work we did in this plan informs that process and can be supportive of their decision making. We also found that there's over 50 FirstNet sites deployed in the state that's up from 30 Something that would in from the 2021 plan, but these are not new towers per se, some new towers but a lot of tower upgrades where AT&T upgraded their equipment to accommodate for snip. And we also had very clear feedback from stakeholders that statewide communication interoperability plan, although they were making some progress on some pieces, many of the goals in that plan could only be addressed with dedicated state funding. Lastly, we looked at the various Vermont statutes that govern the telecommunications planning and goals in the state. And noted a few places where we think lawmakers should revisit the statutes. Number one, broadband speed definitions and deployment parameters are not necessarily fully cohesive across statutes, and especially since a couple of weeks ago when the FCC raised the definition of broadband 200 over 20. We think it just merits kind of a full scan and making sure that our statute is fully aligned to the speeds that we want to encourage in the state. Another thing we know is that the statutorily mandated end date for the Vermont community broadband board, which is July of 2029, is before all of the bead program activities are likely to happen. And again, the VCB is overseeing the bead deployment in the state. So we're just noting that should be looked at. And then in other areas, you know, across a number of statutory goals, some of which were drafted almost four years ago, we just noted some overlapping language, some nonspecific language, and noted the ways in which that can cause you know, kind of lack of focus or alignment across all the stakeholders that work on telecommunications in the state. Such as our recommendations. We made a few recommendations to make wireline deployment more efficient, that's fiber deployment. We were supportive of reinstating the agency of transportation fee waivers that I mentioned earlier in the findings. We as I mentioned, we included a robust study of the workforce gaps that are anticipating the state and we urge stakeholders who are involved in workforce trainings to scale their programs up based on that analysis to make sure the workforce is skilled and

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qualified. We're also recommending that the VCB as well as other stakeholders lead a study to document the process and costs of bearing infrastructure that many stakeholders noted is on the horizon but yet not clear, because that work and the costs associated with that work. In the future, actually really impact the business plans and fiber deployment planning that's going on today. So that's a critical activity that needs to be done.

Alex Kelley

So on the mobile wireless front, there's, as I mentioned, based on our analysis that showed that 50 foot or smaller wireless deployments would make a huge difference in increasing coverage and in fact, do so more efficiently than big towers for the easiest 50% of coverage gaps to close. And we're recommending and we outlined and in a lot of detail what a pilot grant program to deploy these towers would look like. We think that the state should pursue this on a pilot basis in order to collect certain pieces of data that should be used to adjust future rounds of that program and we detail that all in the plan. We also note a number of data collection practices that the public service department can implement to strengthen their ability to plan especially in the mobile coverage environment. We we document in the recommendations how the state can ensure affordability of both wireline and wireless services is prioritized for low income Vermonters we posit a definition of affordable of what the state should consider affordable as 2% of monthly income total for both types of service. We are recommending based on our analysis a subsidy of \$67 a month if the state wants to ensure that both fixed and mobile service is affordable and achievable and attainable for low income Vermonters and we also note that a program to ensure fully subsidized devices and mobile subscriptions are available to enhanced Vermonters would go a long way in ensuring continuous access to service for that population. So in the emergency communications departments, right, we did a significant analysis in the document about the challenges and opportunities with consolidating the state's public safety answering points. So we understand that it's the public safety communications task force charged to come to a decision on that front. We do hope that they use our analysis and that informs their work. You know, as stakeholders noted, some of the work that is yet to be done that's needed to be done simply needs sufficient funding, especially some elements of the skip plan. And then lastly, you know, emergency communications and the resiliency of our communication systems really requires redundancy and resiliency and the leverage that the state has in ensuring that in some of the deployments that are happening now can be built into the grant programs right to ensure that our systems are as strong as they can be as they get built out. Lastly, we provided some thoughts and advice recommendations on how to modernize the statutes to better guide practices in the state for telecommunications. Obviously, there's a number of statutes that need to be reviewed and brought into alignment with each other on the speed definitions and deployment. minimums. There's the Vermont community broadband board sunset date, which I noted earlier, is should be extended if they want the VCBB to be fully in the driver's seat for that whole process. And then we put a lot of thought into how to protect align statutory goals which again are almost 40 years old in many instances, with the current state of deployment strategies, the current emphasis on fiber deployment and local ownership of fiber deployment and public ownership and fiber deployment in Vermont. That is the end of

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the recommendation section. I'll just note these are the hearings remaining with for the plan. They will all have a remote option. And with that, I will pass it back to Hunter and Harlie.

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD

Thank you. That was an overview of the plan. The full plan can be downloaded on our website from the 2024 Telecom plan page. There's an announcement on there with the direct link to it and at this point we will open the floor for any comments.

Member of the Public

To get that plan you go to your website. My suggestion I would have add to you have a whole section to helping people with low income. I bet I'm a veteran, but I'm not disabled but I do know a number of veterans up you and it's just to bring in more information more people onto using sites. I'm sure that they would be one like it to it's another vocal group that can help with the other people.

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD

I will keep that in mind thank you as we have had a few of these there is only a few of us and we have 35 minutes left.

Member of the Public

Workforce training. We have a technical center in St. Albans City, Bell Frey Academy. And I'm sure if you gave a presentation to them, there are a number of young people that could look to jobs with you all or with those people who establish things.

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD

Yes, sir.

Member of the Public

We have a technical center in St. Albans City, Bell Frey Academy. And I'm sure if you gave a presentation to them, there are a number of young people that could look to jobs with you all or with those people who establish things.

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD Yeah, there's a, if you haven't had a chance to read the plan yet, there's a fairly large section devoted to what will be the workforce needs in the event that we get wireless deployment to all of the state and how there's currently a shortfall for those positions. There's some plans to partner with tech centers and local colleges to get training programs in place to train people out to take those jobs.

Member of the Public And within that, since there are not enough young people to do it, um, I would work with the um, Immigration Naturalization Service, yeah, to um, because they also qualify people to come here

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regardless of issues at on the Mexican border, um, but they will look for and help people who have qualifications to get easy access to Vermont.

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD Good point there.

Member of the Public - I can help you some people if you want.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD Thank you, We appreciate that.

Member of the Public – Let’s see what else. As I look through here, I don't think I downloaded that plan. I did come across a federal plan, um, Public Safety task force, and the Mobility fund things, but I didn't see anything else.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD - Yeah, when I get back to my desk tomorrow, I will send you a direct link to the page where you'll be able to get the final draft for the 2024, 10-year plan.

Member of the Public - Thank you.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD Okay, yeah, we have a lot of the plan then we have a lot of backup data and then we have, I think it wound up being 50 to 70 pages of public comments that we so I can go through out a lot of get what I yep take what you want leave the rest.

Harlie Quero – Communications Coordinator; PSD - Alex gave the presentation.

Alex Kelley - Thank you for your comments and feedback, by the way.

Member of the Public - You're welcome. I never knew what you did today. I've never seen that before, hooking up this person. The Voice, you should have work with VLCT and have a presentation for municipal people.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD That's not a bad idea.

Member of the Public - Because we also communicate one with one another um, any of the region’s most of the Town managers will get together for lunch once or every other month um, but we have staffs that are trying to do multiple things and reaching out to people and I can easily see development director.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD - I don't know what resources the state has available for that kind of help. I know that I spent many years working for it in the state and I know that we made available resources for uh, cybersecurity. I don't think we went through the VLCT but we went through some other organization where we interfaced with a lot of towns to try to help them get some basic cybersecurity in place but I don't know if it's necessarily in the Telecom plan but I'm all for getting something going for some Harlie level tech support. Yeah, this is amazing, it is. You guys have a great setup, yeah, a great place for public

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meetings. Apparently, we're being streamed by right behind you and then there's a camera here picking me up. Yeah, this is a really good setup, that's why we like coming back here.

Member of the Public: You know, legislatively, you can't do it but I can. I know a couple of people in the legislature, both Republican and Democrats, and I'm going to take what I heard tonight to my Republican friend and tell her, you know what it is and maybe send her a copy right. So I can lobby, not being a lobbyist, but just as a citizen and knowing people who are in know.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD We appreciate that we, uh, prior to me coming in this role, the previous Telecom director had requested funds from the legislature on two different occasions to get a uh, a granting program for Tower sighting to increase wireless access but unfortunately they were both, they were denied twice. Figured fool me twice and I didn't ask again but now that we have the 10-year Telecom plan back out, we could very well be on our way to asking for that grant money again to try to start that small mobile deployment grant program. We're about to restart a drive test, this summer, late summer, early fall or in 2022 we embedded a device that actually Aaron made and put together into a bunch of AOT vehicles and it went around and measured the actual cell phone signal you get across the state as opposed to the maps that the providers give us which show the whole state as being covered. These guys drove around and they were able to figure out exactly, I don't know what the granularity was probably down to 100 yards or so but um, exactly where your phone started working and when it stopped working, you're driving down the road. So we're looking to do that again and we're looking to um, to pair with either some private entities or some municipal entities to help get coverage on the back roads. So, I grew up on the back roads in Fairfield on a dirt road and I don't think anybody who lives out there ever drives down that road so we're trying to figure out some methods that we can use to try to get some of those roads covered to see where cell phone service is in the more rural areas. I'll say because we're on TV I would like to try to partner with either school buses or FirstStudent. Those people, those guys drive most of the roads in the state of Vermont one way or another, especially in rural areas like this. I know I spent an hour on the bus to get to school in the morning and we took a route through three or four different back roads that no one would be on otherwise so I think that would be a good method to try to get more coverage and more data for exactly where cell phone service starts and stops.

Member of the Public - The other thing Electric Co-op has Co-op where you can sign up for the panels yeah. So, I have them to so my houses if you go neutral although I have rented these spaces to get the electricity doesn't come directly to me. I was thinking of a co-op form or just a partnership on those very rural roads. I don't know how much it cost to put in that what we were talking about before the small 50 yard stretch.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD - It costs a chunk of money.

Member of the Public - but what?

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD - I think when we did this they were talking probably \$100,000 to \$150,000 for everything I think.

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Member of the Public - you put it on a poll telephone for the antennas to get all the wiring in place?

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD- yeah, it's expensive.

Member of the Public - You, I was willing to give away 10, 15,000.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD - I think that's one of the reasons that you don't see more deployment in rural areas is that the return on investment is just not quite there yet, right you know the amount that it still costs to get one of these deployed is uh, is still pretty large in terms of how much you get back considering that the number of subscribers in the area is not that high. And that's where some of the things that we had talked about before for instance uh, rent free options stuff like that help entice hopefully help entice the uh, Wireless providers.

Member of the Public - Yeah, I know the town's willing to do that property um, but that doesn't save that much money.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD Not a ton, but maybe the price has gone down since I talked to him last.

Member of the Public - Yeah, um, just since you're from Fairfield, the town office is fairly high, they should be able to capture some of this too and the Branon.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD Yeah, we just gone to one of the silos. That was my first job it was haying on Branon Farms. It's a maple farm now mostly yeah but spent a summer dodging hay bales and then stacking them in the trailer.

Harlie Quero - Communications Coordinator; PSD – Has anyone else joined?

Member of the Public – Too bad.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD - Yeah, we went out, we advertise these through WCAX right, so there's a banner on the website and then during their streaming service and then we advertise at the department libraries and we advertise our website um, to try to get people to come out we have not had the best of luck with turnout I think the previous ones we advertised on front for forum. Even with that we still didn't really increase turnout, so I don't know how to reach people at this point I guess go at the top of a downtown building in Montpelier and yell really loud.

Harlie Quero Communications Coordinator PSD - We can't really use social media and can't spend a whole bunch of money on Advertising.

Member of the Public - There again town has to send out in envelopes for tax bills yeah and if you had an insert and distributed all it sound ___ it wouldn't add to the cost of the of mail taxes. One page you be another page

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would easily go under that half on or whatever that regulation is that would be another way if you tied it more to when we have to pay taxes.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD Those are definitely notices people uh, take notice of pay attention to that's a good idea too.

Member of the Public - Give him a \$10 credit.

30:25 - 45:06 - This portion of the recording has not been transcribed.

Hunter Thompson - Director of Telecommunications; PSD All right time to adjourn. I think we're close enough here. I will take my lumps if someone joins in the last six minutes accept the scolding, I would get for that by ad burning earlier. Thank you to the interpreters, thank you for attending pleasure. Thank you, Alex, even though you are gone, for presenting and we'll be doing two more of these one next Wednesday which will be remote and in person in Randolph right and then one the following Thursday on the 16th in Springfield which will give people an opportunity to offer more feedback on the 10-year plan. Thank you everybody, have a good night!