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10-Year Telecommunications Plan – Final Draft Hearing Transcript

The following is the transcript from the public hearing held on May 8th, 2024, in Randolph, Vermont, where the Public Service Department presented the final draft of the 10-Year Telecommunications Plan.

Wed, May 08, 2024 5:30PM

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD

All right, it's 530 get started. Hello, I'm Hunter Thompson. I am the director of telecommunications and connectivity with the Public Service Department. We are here at the second public hearing for the final draft version of the 10 year telecommunications plan. The format will be first to start off just so everybody knows this meeting is being recorded. The format will be that Alex will give a slide deck with an overview and presentation of the 10 year plan. After the slide deck we will open up the floor to feedback. Any questions? Okay, Mr. Kelly.

Alex Kelley - RISI

Thank you Hunter. And if you wouldn't mind going on. Are you hearing my own echoes?

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD

Think we're all on mute. We can't hear it on our end. Okay, sorry.

Harlie Quero – Telecommunications Coordinator; PSD

I can mute the Chandler guest for right now. Will that affect your audio? No.

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD

Okay, give that a shot and see what that'd be

Alex Kelley - RISI

great. Perfect. Okay, and Hunter, I can still see you so you can wave your hands if you need me to stop or backtrack. Thank you everyone for attending and viewing this. My name is Alex Kelley. I'm part of the team that supported the putting together the 2024 Vermont tenure telecommunications plan. Today I'm going to give you a little bit of context about the plan and the moment in time with which we put this together. I'll go through a little bit of the research and analysis that went into the plan. talk through some of the changes between the draft version and the final draft version based on public input and then walk through some of the findings and recommendations. And I will also say off the top of the bat that it was a very large and detailed document so I'm not gonna be able to cover every single aspect of the document, nor go into the level of detail that you can find in the document. So I do encourage you to read that as well. So the 10 year plan is guided by statute, and that both the process and the content is in Vermont. statute and that is the the the that is the protocol that we followed for this plan. I would also note that it was created at a moment in time when a lot of resources have been going

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towards telecommunications. Thanks to the American rescue plan capital projects Fund and the broadband equity access and deployment program. And especially that last one, the bead program. That's money that comes from the federal government and comes with a lot of rules attached to it and that those rules are really dictating how the state is going about their wireline fiber deployments at this moment in time. So because that program required a separate planning efforts focused on that type of deployment, this 10 year plan. While we do address all the statutory requirements, we place a special focus on the elements that are not addressed in that simultaneous planning effort to just be efficient with state resources and ensure that this plan is working in concert with the other work being done. A number of pieces of research underpin this plan. We did a major survey found based survey of Vermont residents again focusing on some of the focus areas of this plan. We did online surveys of different sectors. We did many, many interviews with stakeholders from the public and private sector and nonprofit sector. We did a statewide mobile wireless engineering coverage analysis. And we also did a kind of scientific input output, but study to dig deeply into the workforce gaps in the state and the workforce that will be required to execute on all the broadband deployment that is in the offing. As I mentioned, this has been part of a public participation participation process established by statute. This is just a selection of the input process that we've received so far. Notably, we've gotten over 50 pages of feedback during the public comment period. And this is one of a number of hearings that we were doing all that had been advertised on state statewide media. I won't go through the changes to the final draft line by line. But suffice it to say that the 50 pages of input we received were very helpful. And I don't think there's a single section that wasn't updated based on the input from the public and the range of stakeholders that have reviewed the draft. So thank you to everyone who's participated in that thus far. All right. Selection findings. First of all, fiber coverage in the state fiber to the home is expanding rapidly. But through our conversations with stakeholders, we identified some some challenges that have been incorporated into the recommendations of the plan for the state to fix and therefore make this fiber deployment more efficient. So, between 2021 and 2023, the households with access to 100 Meg's symmetrical which can be achieved with fiber infrastructure, more than doubled, right, the rate of that deployment is very quickly and and our planning work and the simultaneous planning work done for the BT plan show that Vermont is on track to pass all on grid premises by five with fiber by 2029. We also found that Vermont really does need to grow its broadband construction workforce to meet the deployment demands that have been already funded or will be funded. That's a sector that has shrank a little bit prior to 2022. And with an anticipated \$700 million or so of deployments in the offing, we need to grow our construction workforce by about 750 workers across the top 12 categories that are involved in construction, probing construction. Another significant finding is that fiber infrastructure owners and builders were concerned about the potential need to bury portions of the network within the next 10 to 15 years as part of utility hardening processes and climate resilience processes. And they express that the kind of costs and responsibilities of that work are unclear but really may impact their business planning and deployment today. So that's a that's a critical gap in the statewide knowledge and, and long term planning, understanding. Lastly, the agency of transportation which had been issuing right of way application fee waivers to support more efficient deployment and unserved areas actually stopped issuing those waivers recently, which ultimately, is a barrier to deploying in the most rural and unserved

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areas in the state. On the mobile wireless side, which most people call cell service, you know, stakeholders noted that that service is really, really critical, a critical part of the connectivity landscape, but coverage expansion has been minimal. So as we looked at, we talked to people and looked at coverage across the state 80% of businesses said that their mobile wireless coverage is not adequate for business needs. And 64% of Vermont residents agreed that the state should use public funds to improve mobile wireless coverage. Well, download speeds have increased, actually, notably by percent from 2018 till 2023. Coverage has seen almost no expansion and approximately 412 miles of road don't have mobile coverage from any provider. We did a robust engineering analysis that showed actually that strategically placed small wireless facilities, which are kind of vertical assets under 50 feet tall, can make really efficient progress towards closing a significant portion of the current world wireless gaps, especially as fiber is deployed increasingly along every roadway in the state. So that was a that was a really important finding, you know, you can't efficiently close the entirety of our mobile wireless gaps with small towers like that. But you can very efficiently tackle the first the easiest 50% of those gaps in the affordability category, affordability remains a significant concern and it actually suffered a recent setback as the affordable connectivity program is sunseting in the state. So the affordable connectivity program is basically in the process of winding down. It had been providing \$30 A month subsidy to about 24,000 Vermonters that subsidy is running out and will be exhausted. It was decreased by half in May and will be exhausted fully very soon. And another interesting finding you know, this ACP subsidy was allowable for qualified low income households to be put to either a fixed broadband service or a mobile broadband service but not both. And stakeholders we spoke to across the public and private sector noted really that both fixed and mobile connectivity are important. And so it's not often a one or the other choice for families that need connectivity. And lastly, healthcare workers in particular noted that without continuous mobile coverage and access to devices and a subscription, enhanced Vermonters in particular struggle to access care, and that that mobile connectivity is a critical connection to the services and the public safety side of things. Public safety systems are continuing to evolve. But but a lot of the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of our public safety communications Outlook does rely on mobile coverage, which as noted remains an issue. So there's a public safety communications taskforce which was established in February of this year, which is evaluating different public safety communications needs. Including the possible consolidation of public safety answering points, and other notable findings at over 50 FirstNet sites, which is a combination of new towers and tower upgrades have been deployed. FirstNet obviously, for those who don't know offers public safety priority and preemption networks and services. That being said, amongst the public safety response survey respondents only a fraction of them reported never losing mobile service on the job. And And finally, there is a statewide communication interoperability plan which kind of sets a course for how the different public safety communication systems work together. And stakeholders we talked to said, you know, the goals of that are pretty clear. There's simply a lack of funding to execute on that fully Lastly, we took a look at the governing statutes that govern both telecommunications plan and that process as well as telecommunications as a whole in the state and noted some inconsistencies or ways that the statutes could be aligned or improved or modernized. For one broadband speed definitions and deployment parameters are not fully cohesive across the statutes. Number two, the statutorily

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mandated end date of the Vermont community broadband board in 2029 may happen before all of the bead program activities will be complete and the CVB is overseeing that program. So we recommend the legislature take a look at that. That date. And then, in general, the statutory telecommunications goals there's 10 of them. Some of them were drafted more recently, but some of them were drafted almost four years ago and we noted numerous areas where those goals contain some overlapping and nonspecific language, which again, can lead to confusion or lack of direction and amongst the people who are operationalizing those goals. Here's a selection of the recommendations. These are flowing from some of the findings I just described. So to make wireline deployment more efficient, we do recommend reinstating the agency of transportation fee waivers until the state achieves full fiber coverage in the unserved areas, right. That's the way the state can use its control over can leverage the right of way to enable broadband deployment. We know that there are training programs and good training programs happening in the state to grow the construction workforce. We highly encourage those training providers to scale their programs to the analysis that we provided to make sure that we have sufficient workforce to build all the broadband we hope to build over the next five years. And we also recommend that the Vermont community broadband board lead study amongst infrastructure owners, fiber and electric utilities to analyze the process and costs of varying infrastructure when that might happen, what the impact to the financials of all the entities involved might be and then most critically, what are the opportunities for savings and alignment with those infrastructure owners working together as that burial happens? We also are recommending what we're calling a small facilities wireless pilot grant program. And we feel that the most effective way to make progress and critically closing the mobile wireless gaps would be via a grant program that focuses on small facilities. Those are the 50 feet or less deployments. And we detail what that could look like in the plan. With in quite a few pages and and feel that dedicating two to 3 million to a pilot program and collecting data on how that program goes will be really beneficial to then iterate on that plan and and find the most efficient way to close our mobile broadband gaps. We also recommended some updated data collection practices at the Public Service Department to strengthen the planning work that can be done and in particular, also measure mobile broadband coverage progress. On the affordability front, you know, given that the federal program is sunseting and so many Vermonters are about to lose access to you know, affordable broadband. We're recommending that the state step up and fill that fill that gap. We put a definition of where of where we think eligibility should be and what we think should be defined as affordable. It's 2% of monthly income, which if you're providing a subsidy to low income Vermonters for both wireline and wireless or both fixed and mobile rather, that comes down to \$67 a month. We also think that it is important to to fully subsidize mobile devices and mobile subscriptions for unhoused Vermonters to ensure they have continuous access to services and care. In the strengthen the state's emergency communication systems, we've provided a significant I think, 10 to 10 pages or so maybe eight pages or so of analysis about the benefits and challenges with public safety answering point consolidation. We're hoping that the public safety communications Task Force uses that analysis to inform their work although they have the ultimate jurisdiction on providing recommendation there. There are some federal grants for particularly communications related activities in the public safety escape plan, but when federal grants are unavailable, obviously the state needs to dedicate the funding to

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allow that plan to be executed. And a big part of emergency communications whether it's wireless or wireline related is just making sure that the networks we are building are as resilient, resilient as possible. And we know the VCB knows this, and this is built into the B plan B process, but it's worth reiterating. You know, the power the state has right now is the leverage they have right now is through their grantmaking so that has that's a key tool to ensuring the networks that are being built are resilient and therefore can strengthen the communication systems as a whole. Lastly, we provided some recommendations on how to modernize the statutes to better guide practices and better align the statute, which again is at times up to 40 years old to align statute with state strategies and where telecommunications is today. I think I will end there and open the floor to comments. We do have a couple of other public hearings coming up. So with that, I will pull my screen down and turn it back over to Hunter and I will need audio back to hear you talking hunter or Harlie if you can unmute the Chandler Thanks.

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD

Okay, how about now? Great. Okay. So since there is no one in person, there won't be anyone here to open it too. So is there anyone on the phone or online who would like to add a comment? I don't believe we have any guests online either. So I don't think we're gonna have a whole lot of input in this particular hearing. We will be here until 630 Either way, but unless there are any objections, I think I will ask orca to meet us so that we can have conversations without them necessarily being broadcast.

Hunter Thompson – Director of Telecommunications; PSD

Thank you to the interpreters for coming, we appreciate your service. We will have another meeting on May 16th at 6:30 in Springfield Vermont, or remotely with Teams. You can get the information directly from our website and we would love to have some participation. Have a great evening everyone, bye-bye.