

An Option for Universal Broadband For Fletcher

by Jon Bondy

As many of you learned at the most recent Town Meeting, Mansfield Community Fiber (MCF) is going to start providing high speed Internet (25 Mb/sec to 100 Mb/sec) this Fall in Fletcher. They will start out providing service along approximately 17 miles of Fletcher roads, focusing primarily in the Binghamville area, because that has the most dense population. They will then continue on to other towns, focusing again on the town centers. They will return to finish building out Fletcher eventually; the schedule is anyone's guess, but 15 years seems about right. They are doing all of this on their own dime: it is not costing the Town anything at all.

The Select Board asked MCF what it would cost to install state-of-the-art broadband in all of Fletcher in the near future, rather than waiting 15 years. The estimates ranged from \$400K to about \$750K. We then asked how this could be paid for, and MCF replied that a "revenue bond" would be the most likely mechanism.

Unlike a regular municipal bond (like the ones that Fletcher used to fund the new Town Office building and the recent major paving project), a revenue bond is not paid back by the taxpayers. Rather, the money obtained through the bond is used to fund infrastructure (the broadband fiber network) and the revenues from that infrastructure are used to pay off the bond.

What this amounts to is that Fletcher residents could vote to take out a bond for something like \$500K, and never have to pay it back ourselves. It would never affect our tax rates. And we would wind up with the best broadband service that exists today.

MCF is in the process of coming up with a specific proposal, which it will present to the Select Board at the end of December. The Select Board will then consider whether they wish to present this to the voters for approval in an Australian ballot around the time of the next Town Meeting.

MCF is committed to coming up with a proposal that will allow **every** resident in Fletcher to have access to the same level of broadband service, whether on a paved road, dirt road, unmaintained road, or private road; they hope to do this in around 4 years. In my opinion, universal access is important, so that we do not have "haves" and "have nots" in Fletcher.

We have also created an RFP to allow Consolidated Communications to bid to provide similar services. We hope to be able to evaluate both options in early January.