

Fletcher Broadband Project History and Status 2021

The History

After over a year of preparation by the Select Board, in June of 2020 the voters of Fletcher approved a loan from the Vermont Economic Development Agency (VEDA) for up to \$510K to support an optical fiber broadband network to be installed throughout all of Fletcher by Mansfield Community Fiber (MCF) with an estimated total project cost of \$1M. VEDA approved a loan of \$480K on 5 November 2020. We applied for a grant from the Northern Borders Regional Commission (NBRC) and we were approved for \$439K on 14 August 2020. We received a Notice to Proceed from NBRC on 17 June 2021.

As has been stated in the past, none of this \$1M will come from taxes paid, nor will it affect the Fletcher Town budget. The broadband project loan will be repaid by income generated by the broadband network itself, from broadband customers.

After we received the Notice to Proceed, we were informed by NBRC of certain requirements in their disbursing process that initially proved to be unfeasible for this project. There were several months of education, exchange of views and ultimate compromises to assure that the logistical and financial risk to all parties would be manageable. Those issues were resolved satisfactorily in late September of 2021.

Summary

Our original thoughts were to spend down the NBRC grant first and then spend down the VEDA loan, to minimize the loan payments, but the requirements and stipulations of the funders didn't align with the project's timeline and/or use of funds. Due to the commitment of these funders, in coordination with MCF and technical assistance from NRPC, we worked through several budget reiterations just in the last few months to resolve these issues and move forward. Fortunately, the Town was able to apply to NBRC for a COVID match waiver, which we were eligible for due to the volatility of the market, and supply chains caused by the pandemic. This waiver means we have immediate access to NBRC funds for eligible project costs and won't have to demonstrate a match as those funds are accessed, which could have resulted in cash flow issues for the project. While this all resulted in project delays, the commitment to this project succeeding was evident by all parties involved and, as of 4 October 2021, the project is underway!

Any project of this size and complexity is unlikely to be completed on time, so please take the following estimates with a grain of salt. For example, the broadband supply chain is currently in turmoil, and it is not clear when optical fiber ordered back in May for delivery in November will actually arrive.

MCF hopes to submit pole applications by the end of October 2021; it can take between 6 and 12 months to get licenses to mount the fiber to the poles. Thus, fiber may start to be installed in the 3rd quarter of 2022, if materials like the fiber arrive in time. Fiber installation will take about 6 months, getting us to the 1st quarter of 2023. Customer connections can start then, with underground connections starting after April of 2023.

We understand that these dates are disappointingly late. However, MCF is confident that the quality of the services they provide will more than justify the patience our towns people have shown. Once the fiber has been hung on the roads and tested for connectivity (which will occur in stages), MCF will notify us when each location can be connected so that folks can subscribe for service on their website, www.mcfibervt.com/subscribe/