

Ashfield Municipal Light Plant (Telecommunications Department)  
Meeting Feb 16, 2012 7pm

Attendees: David Kulp (MLP Manager), Andy Smith (telecom advisory cmte), Betty Stewart (telecom advisory cmte), Jim Drawe (WiredWest exec cmte, Cummington), Reva Reck (WiredWest exec cmte, Warwick), and about 25 other Ashfield residents

The meeting was called to order at about 7:10pm. The intention of the meeting was to discuss broadband options and what actions the town or residents collectively could take to improve our chances of obtaining high-performance, cost effective broadband.

Kulp provided an overview of current broadband options in Ashfield. By their inaction it appears that Verizon will not be making further investments in DSL infrastructure since new residents even within the 3 mile distance to town cannot receive service. It is technically possible to expand DSL to more distant homes and it is possible for third parties to access Verizon's copper wiring and offer DSL, but Verizon has publicly indicated that it is investing primarily in its wireless business and third party access to the antiquated copper wiring is complicated and expensive.

Some residents are using cellular 3G and 4G networks with mixed reviews. The most common problems seem to be lack of coverage and reliability with speeds varying dramatically at different hours. Like satellite service, cellular plans were very expensive considering the severe data caps, which seem to be designed more for casual, mobile users.

GAW CEO Josh Garza has emailed Kulp to indicate their continued commitment to Ashfield. GAW has not contacted anyone in town regarding permitting since its Planning Board meeting in October. Kulp spoke on the phone with Mass Broadband Institute's Jason Whittet and learned that GAW has yet to submit any paperwork for their \$40,000 grant award, which is supposed to include invoices and quarterly reports. GAW has not received any money and the sense of the group was that the company was unlikely to follow through on its plans.

Reva Reck explained how the town of Warwick designed their own wireless network about three years ago. It delivers 1Mb/s service to a fraction of the town. Their community-run network is a complex, technical endeavor and requires ongoing maintenance and support. After hearing her description, the sense of the group was that it would be unwise for Ashfield to invest in its own wireless network now because the cost and effort would be high while the network might be useful for only 2 or 3 years. Return on investment might be insufficient and the Ashfield terrain would be challenging.

There was a lengthy discussion about the latest satellite broadband service from ViaSat (Wildblue). Kulp reported that overall performance was excellent -- relatively low latency (350 ms), very high download speeds (9 Mb/s and higher), and good upload speeds (1-3 Mb/s) -- but the system was expensive and its practical performance in terms of web page loading and conferencing was still worse than experiments with land-based T-1 and DSL technologies. HughesNet plans to offer a competitive system in the summer.

Finally Jim Drawe and Reva Reck, representatives from the WiredWest executive committee, provided a detailed discussion on fiber-to-the-home (FTTH). An evaluation of marketing firm RFP responses was underway for a market survey. Most of the pole and resident locations have been mapped into a geographic information systems database. A new business plan based on survey and mapping data is expected to be completed in the spring. Estimates range from \$50 to over

\$100 million to wire all residents in the WiredWest towns. An effort to finance the project is expected to begin in the summer. A key prerequisite to financing will be to find an anchor service provider who will commit to financial obligations to WiredWest in exchange for exclusive access to customers in the early years. If financing were in place for the entire project then it would be possible to build the entire network in 6-12 months. WiredWest would like to begin providing service concurrent with the MBI's fiber optic backbone completion in mid-2013. The lengthy process of utility pole "make ready" was discussed.

The sense of the group was that there were considerable challenges including identifying an anchor service provider, obtaining financing, and constructing the network, so that it was likely that a fiber optic network might very well arrive much later than mid-2013. But there was a sense of optimism that the system would be built some day. At this time there was no interest from the executive committee in Ashfielders collectively investing in WiredWest because the current plan was to attempt a full financing of the entire regional network at once -- in which case no preferences would be given to any towns except according to business and technical considerations. However, if financing proved to be difficult then WiredWest might attempt to finance one or more pilot towns. If so, the group agreed that Ashfield could compile a strong proposal to choose our town. In the mean time, Drawe requested tax deductible contributions and in-kind services from grant writers and legal, tax, and procurement assistance. The group was very impressed by the detail, effort, and commitment demonstrated by WiredWest and was grateful for their time.

The conclusions from the meeting were productive, but somewhat sobering:

- residents should not expect a wireless broadband network from GAW
- Ashfield will not invest in its own wireless network
- new satellite service is very good, but expensive
- WiredWest's FTTH is well managed, but daunting and there is no current opportunity to accelerate that effort for our particular town's benefit
- given the time frame for FTTH, it seems like a reasonable risk to commit to a 2-year satellite contract soon from ViaSat or HughesNet

Respectfully submitted,  
David Kulp