

Midcoast Internet Solutions

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Prepared for the ConnectME meeting of today.

Midcoast Internet Solutions has been very proud and thankful to be working with ConnectME to bring broadband Internet to two communities. At this time, we'd like to apprise people of the progress, discuss what we've learned, and make suggestions for future consideration.

Progress:

We are within a couple weeks of finishing Somerville. This has involved building two new towers and installing equipment at 5 tower sites. We still have to install some equipment at one tower we have built and a rooftop location to complete our work on this project. Chris Johnson has been the town appointed volunteer to work with us on this and has been very helpful, motivated, and available.

This work in Somerville has also permitted us to provide coverage to some parts of Jefferson, Washington, and Palermo. We are working with Jefferson to figure out a plan for that town. Jefferson has a good cable system, but a large population in Jefferson live away from the main public roads and are out of the reach of the cable build.

We have been meeting with the Edgecomb selectboard and broadband Committee to provide service in Edgecomb. We have not made fast enough progress in Edgecomb. We are presently waiting for answers, probably through attorneys, regarding the town use of Global Tower tower sites located in Edgecomb. We continue to be diligent with this, as the sites are ideal for good broadband coverage. The town has also recently acquired more land at the fire station that will physically allow a tower to be erected at the fire department and I am trying to arrange a meeting with the fire chief to create an acceptable plan for the town. I am also playing phone tag with a seasonal resident tower owner that could bring service to the eastern parts of Edgecomb. Edgecomb has expressed frustration with the pace and infrequent new news about our work in the town. We do have one new repeater for the project installed. It is not covering as much as we'd desire due to Trango Broadband delaying and then failing to release a new radio line that is supposed to be faster and more sensitive than then product in use at

that site. More sensitive means more coverage. At some point we will be replacing the less sensitive Trango radio there with a new Alvarion 900mhz system that is supposed to be the competition to what Trango didn't deliver.

We have been installing wireless Broadband for ten years now, and we understand the excruciating anticipation leading up to being able to service an area. We also greatly enjoy being able to bring the first broadband Internet to an area or customer; the thrill has not changed in ten years, but the costs have come down and speeds have gone up. This excitement of bringing new service to new areas is why we like participating in the ConnectME program.

What we have learned and how it should be applied to the future of ConnectME:

We like working with the towns we serve. This is a big part of the ConnectME experience. The towns have local knowledge, land assets, and connections in the community that are very helpful for the shared cause of providing broadband to more places. Local involvement should remain an important aspect of bringing broadband to more areas.

The ConnectME application promotes town investment in either money or in-kind contributions to improve scoring. We like the commitment this has provided, but it also has a downside. Towns typically like to be as fair as possible in terms of which taxpayers this support will benefit and seek 100% coverage. We like 100% coverage as well, but this requirement deters focused coverage or smaller, quicker, and easier projects. Traditionally, ours and many other WISP's method of delivering service has had no regards for municipal lines. We built our first tower in Owls Head to serve customer in Rockland and Owls Head for example. We typically install infrastructure to support either neighborhoods or areas of a community, or infrastructure to cover a large area for a combination of linking neighborhood repeaters together and picking up remote rural customers.

You will also find as time goes on, and fewer towns can claim 100% lack of broadband. Usually parts of towns have broadband service and parts don't, so a neighborhood and linking infrastructure approach is the type of project to best meet unmet needs in typical towns in the future.

Future ConnectME projects could be completed in a faster time frame, and be done by more potential competitors if the scope of the typical project is reduced.

We have also experienced a lack of staff. We have usually worked at 100% in the warm months due to an increase summer population, and had some time to spare for infrastructure projects in the winter. This has not been the case. The high costs of wireless infrastructure, lack of legacy lucrative profit centers, tight economy,

and increased energy costs have precluded us from having big staff increases, and that has delayed some of our schedules. I see two areas ConnectME might improve these areas while improving Internet and Cell phone technical employment situation in Maine in the process. One area might be that ConnectME might be able to match up people or otherwise promote intern programs between the community college/university systems and the wireless services businesses. This happens to a small extent now with some ISPs, but could be enhanced greatly to the benefit of everyone involved. An Internet business is a desirable place for students to build skills for a computer industry profession.

The other skill issue ConnectME might be able to improve is directly related to wireless. Most of the best skilled people we work with are getting too old to work on towers. There are many typically older men who grew up building their own radios or learned radio skills while serving their country with their Morse code and vacuum tube "rigs". Myself being a tower owner/operator and not being eligible for AARP is quite a novelty in Maine. We have also seen delays at getting tower work done because there are so few folks that can safely climb towers or construct towers. We do some tower climbing ourselves, but would like more staff to be trained in tower work and would like additional choices for sub-contactors. We have also observed many safety issues at municipal tower sites that could be improved with more tower skilled Mainers. Towers are going up everywhere for every purpose. The people skilled to work on them are commonly either imported for the construction or are getting up in their years. Municipalities and public safety organizations don't have a clue about what is safe and what is not. If ConnectME funded, organized, and publicized a tower safety certification course (there are national companies that do these short term classes), it could be very useful for all parties that use towers including ISPs, Cell phone companies, private tower owners, and public safety/municipal tower owners.

We would also ask that along with favoring smaller scope projects that the approval intervals are more frequent. Ideally, I'd like to be able (after current projects are finished) to submit a proposal, the necessary/required processes would commence in response to the application and the project would be approved or denied. In practice though, more times-per-year that applications could be due would be a favorable step in that direction. I think with smaller typical project scope, such a system could increase the number of projects and pace for accomplishing ConnectME goals.

Sincerely,

Jason Philbrook
President, Midcoast Internet Solutions