



Select Board /Assessors Meeting Summary

Sept. 29, 2021

6:00 P.M.

Select Board members Present: Wes Daniel, Mitch Garnett and Tom Johnston

Others Present: Sara Bullard from the town Broadband Committee, Mark Ouellette from Axiom Technologies, Joan Tognacci; via Zoom, Martha and Bill Orrick

Wes Daniel deferred to Sara Bullard and Mark Ouellette to begin the informational portion of the meeting at 6 p.m.

Sara indicated Mark was present to speak about the Broadband planning grant process and the next steps. Mark noted the application for the grant opens the following Friday and remains open for the next month. He said there is much work to be done with the help of the town, the Broadband Committee and Sara. The state already has decided Washington's project meets the federal criteria, Mark said, and Sara was given two thumbs up to apply. He said once the planning grant is submitted, the town should hear back about its application by mid-November. Regarding the NTIA grant, Mark said those awards also should be announced by the end of November.

If the NTIA grant is not received, Mark said the town will still move forward with the full-blown planning process. But, he said he fully expects a NTIA grant to be awarded to Washington because the state applied on the town's behalf for the \$30 million grant and the state had indicated it is excited about the potential for broadband internet in Washington and neighboring Somerville.

Washington has applied as a municipally owned broadband system, and Mark assured Select Board members that the town will own the system. It will be operated by the provider, Axiom, which will handle all billing, maintenance, repairs and insurance of the system. If the town is awarded 100 percent of its grant request, Axiom will make a profit, Mark said. There will be no tax burden, and nobody will be required to subscribe to the service, but Mark said the system will rival anything in the world for speed. People who are not connected to the grid, or with long driveways, will be figured into the plan so that everyone who lives in town will be offered the chance to connect to broadband, he said. Mark thanked Select Board members for signing off so quickly and reminded them that they can reject the grant if they wish. He said the planning grant is a hedge against not receiving the NTIA grant.

If Washington does not receive the grant this time around, it is likely the town will miss the next filing deadline in November, but Mark said he thinks more money will be allocated for broadband and that eventually, the town would be eligible. Also, without the NTIA grant, the town will be required to pay a match – typically 20 percent – but regardless, Mark said the majority of the system will be paid for by someone other than taxpayers. He said it is possible to pay back the bond with revenue from subscribers.

Tom Johnston asked if the planning grant is the roadmap for the system. Mark said it is – at the very least, the planning grant will outline the location of the central office, which dictates how the rest of the system is laid out.

Tom asked if the town should assume it will not receive 100 percent funding through the grant process. Mark and Sara both responded no. Mark elaborated and said there are variables that could change the overall cost of the project, including the “pole make ready” work estimate – he said \$120,000 is included in the town’s application for that work. An extra cushion is required by the federal government as well but Mark said it is nearly impossible to accurately predict third party quotes. He gave an example Axiom ran into in the town of China – underground utilities, which cost more to work with because they must be accessed underground rather than on overhead poles. Overall, the poles in Washington look good, Mark said, but he would like to ride around town to check things out more. Tom offered to drive Mark.

Sara asked if Select Board members were feeling comfortable with a municipally owned system because there had been some concern during previous discussions.

Tom asked if the town would need an internal administrative agency to look ahead. Mark said part of the planning process is a five-year projection and he said no small town really needs a full-time administrator. He said Axiom will track the money, subscriber numbers and make sure everything that needs to happen is happening. Reviews of the information can be at the Select Board level or Broadband Committee level. Mark said if the town wishes to hire an administrator, it is welcome to do so.

Tom said he feels the subscription cost to residents should be fairly low, based on the amount of the grants. Mark said there are other short- and long-term factors to consider when setting the subscription cost.

Tom said he expected some of the fees to be returned to the town.

Joan Tognacci asked if the annual town audit will include the broadband system and Mark said it would. Tom noted some extra money might need to be allocated for the audit in that case.

Sara asked about a percentage of subscriber fees being returned to the town. Mark said typically those are paid quarterly.

Tom said there are still a lot of things the town doesn’t know about the project. Mark said the planning grant will help answer many questions, and Axiom and the town can negotiate price points including for those seasonal residents and a 2 percent turnover rate.

Mitch Garnett asked what the timeline looks like. Mark said pole licensing is out of Axiom’s hands but typically it takes eight months. Add another four months to build the system and get people connected, he said, and Washington is looking at a 12 to 14-month timeframe – he cautioned the federal government does not move quickly and it will probably be at least two months after the grant award announcement that the town will receive any money. Mark said because the state will apply for the NTIA grant on the towns’ behalf, the state will deal with much of the required paperwork and also will provide administrative support to towns.

Tom asked if the money goes through the state or if the towns will deal with the federal government instead. Mark said he believes disbursements will come from the state; even so, it will be 2023 before the broadband project will be completed.

Tom noted the Select Board is authorized to apply for and spend grants but said at some point, he believes another town vote should be taken. Wes agreed. Tom said someone should check with Maine Municipal Association or the town attorney to be sure but even if, legally, a vote isn't required, he would like to see an additional town vote. Mark said it might depend on the time frame. Wes said the board has already seen the support of voters, and Mark referred to the special town meeting as one of the most amazing meetings he's ever been to.

Mitch asked if the broadband system could be a revenue source for the town. Mark urged the board to be reasonable about expenses and profit.

Mark suggested the town self-insure the system. He estimated a \$3.5 million cost to build it and say there is no way the town would lose that much and half that estimated cost is labor. That level of loss, he said, would equate to the Ice Storm of 1998 five times over. By self-insuring, Mark said, the town can set aside money for expected losses each year such as line breaks, broken poles, etc.

Tom asked how sturdy the fiberoptic cables are compared to electric and telephone lines. He said even during power outages, most people do not lose phone service. Mark said fiberoptic cables are glass and can be crushed by very heavy trees but because there will be more utility lines between the trees and the fiberoptic, that should help prevent breakage. When there is a break, it's easily repairable, Mark said, the repair crews simply melt the glass and fuse it back together.

Mark said Axiom would need to connect Washington's broadband system to its network in Portland, and to do that would probably make a wholesale connection via Consolidated Communications. He reiterated that Axiom would be providing internet service. Other options for connecting to Portland include the Three-Ring Binder or LCI, he said, which are more expensive options.

Tom asked what size the central office needs to be; Mark said eight-by-ten. It could be on the side of the road but a sheltered and controlled environment is preferred. Mark said an automatic generator is required and it should be propane fueled. Often, towns use public works or fire department buildings, he said. Tom pointed out that the generator at the fire station is not automatic. Mark asked if the town office/fire station are centrally located – as the central office should be. He said there will be trade-offs in figuring out the central office location and use of high-count fiber (because if it breaks, it's a large repair).

As far as outages, Mark said broadband repair crews must wait for CMP to complete repairs first so any large power/broadband outage could last between 24 and 48 hours. He said the emergency response crews for Washington would be based in Poland, which also means a couple of hours of response time will be spent on the road.

Mitch asked if there currently is a fiber shortage and Mark said there is. He suggested once the grant money is awarded and the pole licensing has begun that an order is placed then so materials are received before/when construction is ready to begin. Mark also said it would be ideal to get Washington in the line for construction workers for the project as well. Joan asked where the fiber is manufactured. Mark said overseas but it is a "Buy America" situation. He said Corning is the highest standard. Electronic

components are backordered as well, he said, and suggested setting expectations in town for the anticipated delays for materials. Sara said the most common question she's asked is if broadband will be free and noted that if the town votes against accepting/spending any grant money for the project, there still are opportunities. Tom said if the town votes against free, it's over.

Mark said he has much work to do still but is available for any questions. He said the grant application already has been signed off on by the Select Board but his goal is to try to make sure it reflects Washington. He said he'll rely on Sara and board members to reach that goal.

Sara asked about digital inclusion projects and Mark said \$2,500 is included in the grant for that.

Wes Daniel called the Select Board/Assessor's meeting to order at 7:05 p.m.

Approve Summary of Sept. 22: Motion to approve summary by Tom Johnston, Mitch Garnett seconded; all in favor, motion carries.

Sign Treasurer's Warrant dated Sept. 29, 2021:

P/R Warrant #80: \$5,271.44

A/P Vendor Warrant #81: \$208,026.64

Wes Daniel noted the A/P warrant includes the county tax payment of \$181,000+ as well as a truck loan payment. Motion to pay warrants by Tom Johnston, Mitch Garnett seconded; all in favor, motion carries.

Road Foreman Report: Written by Frank Jones Jr. and read by Wes Daniel

9/19: Called out for downed tree on Bill Luce Road

9/20: Put up winter sand (3,000 yards), with about 1,500 yards to go

9/21: Steven had doctor's appointment, David and Frank put up road signs for village area on Route 220 and Bill Luce Road; put in two loads of salt and made surface gravel.

9/22: Steven worked on P500 dump body; David and Frank made surface gravel

9/23: Worked on P500 dump body; Travis came to fix P300 wheel seal and ABS sensor

CEO Report: None

Health Officer Report: None

Town Clerk/Treasurer's Report: Mary Anderson said she received an email from Ray Sisk about hazardous mitigation grant funding, which she thought she'd sent to Don Grinnell. Don said the application process is very complicated. Mary noted the deadline for applications is June so she would look into it and check with Don again. Wes confirmed that a track record of past hazards is required.

Mary said new Assessor's Agent Becky Adams would be in the office Thursday, Sept. 30.

The checking account balance is \$858,184.07. People have been paying their property taxes and signing up for the tax club.

Mary is looking into guidelines for the federal grant regarding what the money can be spent on. Tom suggested MMA might be able to help.

Mary checked with MMA about wording for an ordinance change but MMA doesn't give wording for ordinance. They suggested consulting with the CEO or town attorney; it's been handed back over to Corey (with the help of Mary and Stephanie as needed). Mary said there will be wording finished by the next meeting so the Select Board can meet deadlines for a public hearing before the November vote.

Drexell White emailed to see if the town would help test a new online Health Officer website. Stephanie tried to access it and was unable to do so and has reached out to Drexell for guidance.

Mitch asked if Mary has heard anything back from Peter Drum about a Prescott Road property and Mary said she has not.

Other Agenda Items: Wes said three auto graveyard/junkyard inspections were done. Mitch said fuel storage of more than 1,000 gallons needs to have a plan or spill kit on site. Tom said that only applies if the junkyard is within reach of a watershed. Mitch said that was the only reference to gallons of fuel he could find. Wes asked how much (Tim Jackson) had. Tom said Tim blends the gas with oil and burns it, which reduced its flammability and combustibility. Wes asked if the three licenses should be approved. Tom said under the current rules, yes, but suggested adding something about fuel storage going forward, though he did not know who might enforce any rules about fuel storage. Mitch suggested Maine Department of Environmental Protection or another agency might have control when it comes to large amounts of fuels. Tom said Tim has had about the same amount of fuel on site for several years. Wes said he hopes there's no mistake when mixing and burning. Tom made a motion to approve all three licenses, Mitch seconded; all in favor, motion carries.

Wes suggested increasing the fee from \$75 to \$100 per year for junkyards going forward. Tom said he thought that already was done but Wes said it had not been done. Wes made a motion to increase the junkyard permit fee to \$100 per year, Tom seconded; all in favor, motion carries.

Wes said the town received a proposal from Hagar for McDowell Road next year in the amount of \$250,240. He said he mentioned the proposal for budget-planning purposes and said it would cover 1.76 miles. Tom asked if the proposal was for only a base coat and not a finish coat. He said the correct thing to do would be to grind/grade and then pave. Wes said he would put the proposal in the budget committee folder. Tom said in the past, it's been a base coat then surface coat, which will cost more money than what's included in the proposal. Mitch asked if paving is considered a capital improvement. Wes said the money comes from the paving budget, and some from capital improvement. Tom said there might be some state money available as well.

Questions and Comments: None.

Motion to Adjourn by Mitch Garnett, Tom Johnston seconded; all in favor, motion carries.

Meeting adjourned at 7:25 p.m. Respectfully submitted by Stephanie Grinnell