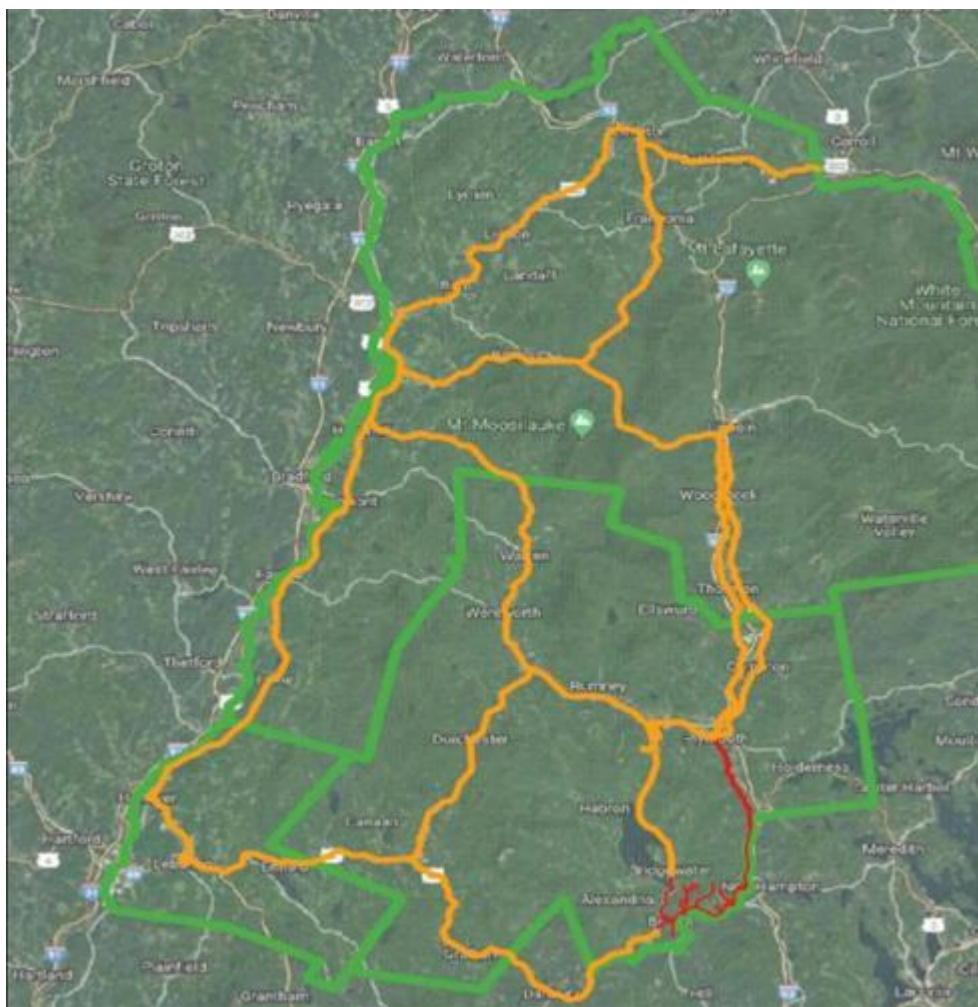


https://www.caledonianrecord.com/news/local/grafon-county-broadband-initiative-considers-next-steps/article_c2f5bfce-5fc1-59f5-9eeb-814e95b5f4dc.html

Grafton County Broadband Initiative Considers Next Steps

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The Grafton County fiber-based broadband project is now taking its next steps of reaching out to towns to determine their specific needs and interviewing Internet service providers. This map of the broadband backbone shows Littleton and surrounding communities at the top. (Map contributed by the Grafton County Broadband Committee)

Grafton County's fiber-based broadband initiative is poised to take big steps forward in 2022.

A week after the Grafton County Executive Committee authorized \$3.7 million in federal stimulus funding to complete the final engineering of the remaining 240 miles of middle-mile network and last-mile networks for all 39 towns in the county, the Grafton County Broadband Committee is moving forward on the next steps.

To begin in the coming weeks, they include reaching out to communities to determine their specific needs and connecting them with grant and funding sources, as well as interviewing a growing number of interested Internet service providers.



Visiting the towns will be members of the county broadband committee: Katelyn Robinson, a grant writer from the Northern Community Investment Corp. who can connect communities to funding sources, and a technical team from eX2, the project's contractor.

“We’re going to sit down with each of these communities and figure out with them how are they are going to build this in their community, what are the things that they can do, and what do they need to do to need to get started,” Nik Coates, chairman of the Grafton County Broadband Committee, said Wednesday.

While those communities looking to develop high-speed broadband for their residents, businesses, towns, schools and first responders can go it alone if they choose, it would be beneficial for many to partner together to apply for different grants and funding sources, such as money from the Northern Border Regional Commission, which is accepting preliminary letters of interest for the next few weeks, said Coates.

“Part of this is helping them meet with each other and work together,” he said.

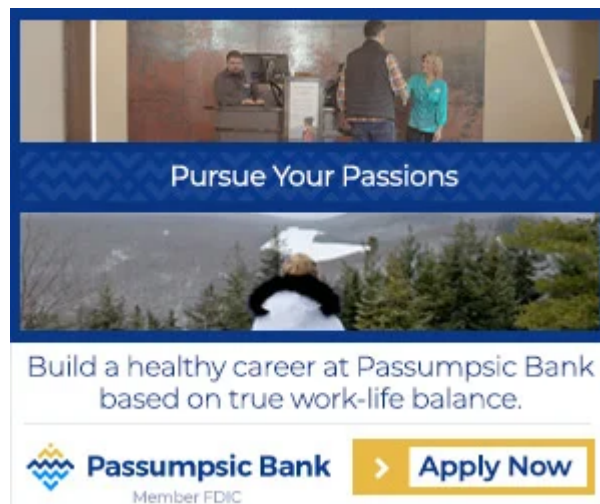
The outreach that is beginning now will set up meetings with communities for a late-April to late-May time frame, though it could be earlier.

“The second thing we are looking at, beginning April 8, is interviewing Internet service providers,” said Coates. “We’ve got a list of about a dozen that we’ve either heard from already or we know might be interested in the area. We’ll be sitting down every Friday starting on April 8 and probably through the end of May interviewing providers and getting a sense if they want to be part of the entire county or just a part of it, and where it is they want to go. The idea is we would be able to go to these different communities and say we know that ‘x-y-z’ company is interested in your area, so here’s their contact information.”

Under the current timeline, the final engineering for the middle and last miles is projected to be complete around November.

Construction will begin after that and go into 2023, when the middle-mile, or backbone through the county, is expected to be completed.

Federal funding programs involve billions of dollars for broadband and include the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program.



Then there's money from the state, anywhere from \$50 million to more than \$100 million, that will be made available from New Hampshire's portion of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 funding, said Coates.

The ARPA funding is for capital projects and is largely focused on broadband, he said.

Other funding sources include the U.S. Economic Development Administration as well as, on the state level, tax credits from the New Hampshire Community Development Finance Authority.

Most towns in northern Grafton County, such as Bath, Haverhill, Franconia, Landaff, Littleton, Lyman and others, are eligible for Northern Border Regional Commission funding, while other municipalities in southern Grafton County are not.

While the county broadband committee will be meeting with Internet service providers, it also plans to reach out to major employers and healthcare providers, such as Littleton Regional Healthcare, and speak with them as clusters to determine if they need a direct connection for their operation and if all their separate buildings and satellite locations need fiber as well, said Coates.

“One cluster will be healthcare, because then we can have that conversation around telehealth and what their needs are around telehealth and multiple satellites offices and how to connect those offices together,” he said. “Another cluster will be public entities like DOT [the New Hampshire Department of Transportation].”

Other clusters will include mutual fire aid associations and sheriff’s departments.

One of the questions the Grafton County Executive Committee asked the broadband committee when the committee brought forward its \$3.7 million funding request on March 21 was, what about the communities that don’t want broadband or, like the city of Lebanon, don’t need it because they’ve already built theirs out, said Coates.

The committee had several responses.

“One, everybody still has folks that are in the gaps, and we’re trying to make sure those gaps are filled,” he said. “The second is every community is a link in the chain ... The third is if you really just don’t want it, we’re not going to force you to do anything. We’ll either not spend the money or give the money back to the county or ask the county to re-purpose it for something else. That will be a conversation we’ll have with the communities. If you do nothing and you’re all set, that’s okay, too.”

With just a thin river separating Grafton County from Vermont communities, the Grafton County Broadband Committee, which began its work in September 2020, has been in talks with communication districts in Vermont about connecting with what they’re doing and providing a level of redundancy, backup, and service and attracting service providers in Vermont, said Coates.

“Now, you open a bigger market,” he said. “We think there’s some value there.”

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