

Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes

Meeting Details: Thursday, March 27, 2025

6:30 pm – 7:44 pm

Lincoln County Service Center (801 N. Sales Street Merrill, WI 54452)

County Board Room (#255/257/260)

Online Access: <https://meet.google.com/bjz-oiso-gpx>

Action Team Attendees (6/9 total): Tom Backen (Vice Chair), ~~Jennifer Bishop~~, Sara Guild (Secretary), ~~Clyde Nelson~~, Heidi O'Hare, Amanda Patterson*, ~~Gordan Sennet~~, Earl Welker, Ken Wickham (Chair)

Other Attendees (4 total): Brian Arndorfer, Andrew Caylor*, Renee Krueger*, Travis Spoehr

**Participated online (3 total)*

1. Call to Order – 6:30 pm by Wickham

Action Team Quorum = 6 (Backen, Guild, O'Hare, Patterson, Welker, Wickham)

2. Welcome & Introductions

3. Public Comment - NONE

4. Approve Lincoln County Broadband Commission Meeting Minutes – February 27, 2025

Welker/Backen motioned to approve the February 27, 2025, minutes as presented; motion carried.

5. Commission Chair Updates

Wickham reported minimal Chair activity during March, most of which involved email communications with PSC representative Mark Leonard discussing the BEAD program status; details were shared under the next agenda item.

6. Public Service Commission (PSC) Updates

a. BEAD Program

In Leonard's absence, Wickham reported that the PSC remains busy processing Round 1 BEAD applications and expects to release their decisions in April. Attendees questioned if the current uncertainty around federal grant funding would impact the BEAD program. Guild shared information she has seen related to other federal grants that indicate it is unlikely the program will be cancelled, but the scoring criteria may be adjusted to remove certain disputed components. Welker noted that there appears to be some movement to allow more non-fiber options to be utilized. Attendees discussed some anticipated challenges and possible future actions for the LCBC based on the BEAD program information that has been shared to date.

Welker also reported that the Town of Schley was recently contacted by a new internet service provider looking for information on town's right-of-way and permitting. He has also seen some information that appears to indicate Frontier might be planning to install new copper lines. Attendees briefly discussed if copper-based infrastructure can still be installed per the known state and federal policies and other comparable decisions.

7. Internet Services Provider (ISP) Updates

a. Charter RDOF Project Implementation Updates

No updates or new maps were provided this month. Guild has been working with a resident on Alexander Lake Road to help determine if Charter would consider extending fiber services another mile north of where it was recently installed as part of the RDOF expansion. There is some indication that Charter might consider it if there is additional funding provided by the County, but Wickham confirmed there is none in the current budget. Guild will keep working with Charter to see what might be required to make this happen, both in the current situation and in case other comparable requests arise in the future.

b. Other ISP Updates

None present, but Bertram Communications confirmed via email after the February LCBC meeting that they did successfully submit their BEAD application for Lincoln County as planned.

8. Proposals for Proactive Future Initiatives & Focus Areas

Wickham, Backen, Guild, and Spoehr met virtually with two UW-Extension representatives on March 13th to discuss ideas for things the Commission could do moving forward to continue pursuing its objective of improving internet utilization throughout Lincoln County now that BEAD is expected to largely address the issue of securing new service. Extension staff offered two primary suggestions:

- a. Submit a grant to get funding for a Digital Navigator position that can provide more extensive, personalized services throughout Lincoln County; this initiative could potentially be led by the region's libraries.
- b. Complete a digital asset mapping process to identify all current resources related to digital access and utilization, then use that info to determine where there are gaps and develop proposals to address them.

Following the meeting, Guild contacted both libraries to discuss the Digital Navigator grant proposal, and O'Hare has reached out to the Wisconsin Valley Library System to assess their interest. Attendees discussed the potential benefits of having a Digital Navigator that can provide more personalized services to residents. Guild had proposed using the USDA Community Connect grant, but there were concerns about the lack of staff capacity to complete a federal grant by the deadline, as well as the very competitive nature of it and the grant's preference for larger projects. Upon confirming the grant was due in April, and not May as initially thought, attendees agreed there was not enough time to complete the application this year but will keep the Digital Navigator idea in mind as a possible future goal.

c. Broadband Asset Mapping

Attendees also reviewed information from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance website related to digital asset mapping (<https://www.digitalinclusion.org/asset-mapping/>). The NDIA program was recommended by UW-Extension as a way to complete the asset mapping process using an organized and proven method; Extension also offered to assist with completing the process. Attendees brainstormed ideas for things that could be included when completing the asset mapping process, such as past digital literacy training programs and their outcomes, surveys to identify desired resources and services, and a list of agencies that offer digital literacy support services. It was felt that this process could give the LCBC critical information to help guide their future initiatives and attendees agreed this should be the organization's next area of focus.

LCBC leadership will contact UW-Extension to request their assistance with completing the digital asset mapping process, ideally starting at the April LCBC meeting. Guild will also share the NDIA asset mapping web page and encourage all interested LCBC supporters to watch the 55-minute informational webinar ahead of the April meeting; an in-person webinar viewing will also be offered one hour before the next LCBC meeting for those who prefer to watch it in a group. If Extension staff provide other suggestions for things the LCBC members can/should do to prepare for the asset mapping discussion, Guild will share this information via email.

9. Action Team Member Updates & Inquiries - NONE

10. Future Meeting Topic Suggestions

The April meeting will include the digital asset mapping process kick-off. Wickham also requested attendees review the current LCBC Guidelines ahead of the planned review at the May meeting to allow time for any proposed changes. The May meeting will include finalizing any changes to the current LCBC Guidelines; the LCBC will also vote on the three Action Team member positions whose terms expire this year.

O'Hare suggested a future meeting include a discussion about promoting broadband resources and requesting feedback on broadband services, including targeting summer tourists to help determine how additional broadband access could impact visitors' decisions to spend more time in Lincoln County. Attendees agreed this should take place, and potentially be incorporated as part of the asset mapping process.

Welker suggested a future digital literacy program be developed to help residents better understand their actual internet service usage levels so they know how much internet service they should purchase to meet their needs.

11. Confirmation of Next Commission Meeting Date/Time/Location

The next Lincoln County Broadband Commission meeting will be held on Thursday, April 24, at 6:30 pm in the Lincoln County Service Center; online access will be provided. There will also be an optional viewing of the NDIA digital asset mapping webinar offered starting at 5:30 pm.

12. Meeting Adjournment – Meeting adjourned by Wickham at 7:44 pm.

Minutes Approved: 04/24/2025 by LCBC, recorded by SG