



Re-Engineering the Region Rural Broadband Expansion & Digital Literacy

Eastern Maine Development Corporation (EMDC) is seeking funding for a four-county regional project to identify current capacity, infrastructure and digital literacy needs of businesses, public and nonprofit sector institutions, and residents in individual communities and across the region. This needs assessment will provide the necessary data to inform a collaborative process involving stakeholders and broadband providers to develop short and longer-range plans to increase the supply and demand for high speed internet access and adoption as a strategy to accelerate economic growth and enhance the quality of life of residents. The four county region includes Hancock, Penobscot, Piscataquis, and Waldo counties.

Through conversations with Larry Sterrs (Unity Foundation and Unitel), Susan Corbett and Mark Ouellette (Axiom), Peter Taylor (Maine Community Foundation), and the Island Institute, the following observations were noted:

1. An approach that promotes regional collaboration among communities may be a more attractive package to incent investment and expansion of broadband services by existing providers. (increased numbers)
2. New rule allowing hook up to utility poles may help
3. Work needs to be performed in stages, with Stage I consisting of community planning, and Stage II an implementation stage looking at a hybrid approach to connectivity and increase user capacity
4. Government investment needs to be investigated to support a public/private partnership for expansion
5. Conversations need to continue with ConnectME particularly for investment strategies
6. A discussion with Fairpoint is warranted to hear more about Connect America Fund (CAFII) monies
7. To have adequate speeds for all connectivity uses, it is estimated that a residential family would need 10Mbps/10Mbps; according to ConnectME, only 12% of Mainers have those connectivity speeds
8. A pilot effort in initial communities early in the project will build the necessary "template" to take to other communities
9. Communities need to understand their needs and best solutions before moving forward on broadband expansion
10. A meeting should be called bringing communities, legislators, Tim Schneider from the Office of Public Advocate, existing network providers, representative from Maine Energy, Utilities and Technology Commission, and local/regional experts to the table. The meeting will serve as a venue to discuss possible

packages for services and elements necessary to perform the assessment project.

11. Consultants should work independent of EMDC staff, board and advisory members to eliminate any perception of bias or influence on outcomes
12. Selected consultant should be an independent contractor not affiliated with service provider
13. Digital Literacy is an important feature that needs to be included in the pilot study. Often, lack of access is due more to the need for training and increased comfort with technology. Discussions with Axiom, the Unity Foundation, and like organizations need to be performed to prepare strategies that may include on-site training for businesses, tying computer and digital literacy to adult education opportunities. Build customized training packages.
14. We need to support the “learning economy model” connecting broadband education to workforce development
15. The project should look at the development of downtown “hot spots”
16. Should a regional commission for broadband technology/digital literacy be developed to guide communities and convene major players as needed?
17. Are funds available through the newly approved legislative bill to fund community planning?

Project Development

EMDC will coordinate this multi-county effort. This will include the administration of daily operations, communications with stakeholders, communities, consultants, and existing network providers, collaboration with the project consultant charged with performing the community assessments, report generation, and budget oversight.

Each community in this region will be a full partner in this process, working with EMDC staff to identify and convene interview subjects and schedule community meetings as needed. In addition, communities will be asked to contribute to the required non-federal funding match. Securing match funding from all participating communities will signal the community’s investment and commitment to actively participate in the broadband expansion project through a sharing of information and involvement in the data collection process.

Early in the process, selected stakeholders, industry experts, and existing network providers will be invited to participate in a strategic planning discussion to gain insight for developing a project that will address critical elements to move the broadband expansion project to implementation. Our goal is to build existing network provider interest and investment for this regional project by providing a forum early in the process for them to share their expertise and actively participate in the development of recommendations that they would help implement. Identifying sources of capital for both infrastructure investment and implementation of adoption strategies will be integral to the planning process as it’s the most cited barrier to increasing access and usage of broadband. Exploring the

feasibility of different forms of public/private partnership as a strategy for capital formation will be included in this process.

Following this strategic session, a comprehensive grant proposal will be prepared and submitted to potential public, private and foundation funders. The application will outline the proposed project including an initial pilot/trial phase (Phase I) in a small number of communities to refine the assessment process. Building on the outcomes of the Phase I pilot, the project will be fine-tuned and launched full-scale in the four- county region (Phase II).

For phase 1 and phase 2 assessment processes, a Request for Proposals (RFP) will be developed and circulated to a variety of technology companies. Candidates will be asked to outline their plan to assess each community's needs, the methodology for the assessment, and the contents of a final report outlining recommended steps and estimated cost by community to increase access through further infrastructure investment and/or increase adoption to strengthen demand of existing infrastructure.

The selected candidate will be required to perform an in-depth assessment to determine:

- Current broadband/internet capacity – includes both active and dark fiber optic in place and other technologies, both within town boundaries and the last mile to residential homes (what do you have?)
- Wish list (what do you want?)
- The current consumer demand among businesses, public and nonprofit businesses, and residents.
- Projected needs – explanation of expected usage moving forward (what do you need?)
- Digital Literacy - assessing the current skills and comfort using internet connectivity by businesses and residents

The assessment of each community will be performed through a series of one-on-one business and resident interviews, survey of businesses and households, and a series of focus groups and/or public town meetings.

Based upon the final report, a template of action will be developed to arm each community to information to expand their capacity locally and as a collaborative region. EMDC will convene communities to discuss findings and explore opportunities for collaboration and cost sharing to the end of increasing the market opportunity for existing network providers. Additionally, EMDC will help broker conversations between communities and existing network providers. Each community will also be given an implementation guidebook that can be used for discussions with existing network providers, infrastructure planning and implementation, and digital training.

Timeline (6 months)

October 2015	Finalize outline, budget and timeline
October 2015	Begin planning invitation list, agenda and meeting date/location for strategic planning session
November 2015	Convene a strategic planning meeting with regional stakeholders, existing network providers, industry experts and State of Maine government representatives
November 2015	Prepare grant application to secure funding
December 2015	Potential outcome/announcement of funding
January 2016	Prepare Request For Proposals for Broadband experts to perform pilot study
March 2016	Launch Phase I of project in limited communities
April 2016	Finalize Phase I outcomes/community reports and fine-tune process for Phase II
April 2016	Launch Phase II across 4-county region
January 2017	Complete assessment project

Budget

A detailed budget itemizing expenditures for each component of this project will be developed. In the interim, a preliminary budget is identified.

Salaries

Director of Re-Engineering the Region & Planning (40%)	\$26,035	
Community Affairs Manager (50%)	\$21,564	
Project Assistant (100%)	\$35,000	
Business Development Specialist	\$10,000	
Administrative Assistant	\$2,000	
	Total Salary	<u>\$94,599</u>
Fringe Benefits		<u>\$38,436</u>
	Total Salary & Fringe	\$133,035

Consultant(s) (technology/capacity assessment)	\$500,000
Travel	\$5,000
Supplies	\$2,500
Marketing	<u>\$10,000</u>
Total Direct Costs	\$650,035
Indirect	<u>\$54,052</u>
Total Project Budget	\$704,087

Match to the total project budget will include private and community investment (non-federal or state funds).