



TO: Sara Guild – Marathon County Board: Extension, Education, and Economic Development
Committee Chair
Kurt Gibbs – Marathon County Board Chair
Brad Karger – Marathon County Administrator

FROM: Jason Hausler – UW-Extension
Nathan Sandwick – UW-Extension
Brianna Wight – UW-Extension

DATE: November 2, 2018

RE: **Community Leader – Broadband Focus Group Notes**

Hausler began the meeting with an introduction and discussion of focus group goals related to Marathon County's 2018 Strategic Plan. He welcomed Nathan Sandwick from Portage County and described how Nathan was going to assist with the focus group.

Hausler reminded everyone of the 2009 Gap Analysis, and suggested that some of the questions for today's consideration include: 1) what progress has been made? 2) what still holds true, and what has changed? 3) what is our current county broadband status?

Focus group participants then introduced themselves:

- **Brad Karger** indicated that the process of expanding broadband access is complicated and needs to be done strategically. He mentioned that we need to prioritize our efforts and that the information provided today will assist with that.
- **Kristine Gilmore** stated that Hwy J is not rural, and yet we do not presently have reliable access at this location where the DCE middle school resides. She described how it becomes complicated with kids because they cannot even download videos for school work, she specifically noted the broadband challenges they faced at Hatley Elementary, and that providing reliable internet access is as important today as electricity was 50 years ago. Gilmore said, "We need to be part of the solution." She mentioned that the DCE school district trenched specific locations using their own dollars to provide access in some locations.
- **Brad Gast** described how NTC educational opportunities are moving online, and that virtual options have tripled in recent years. Not having reliable access to the internet is a huge barrier for some of his students. The county's efforts to assist with providing this access will allow more people to "achieve their dreams and will upscale the workforce." Gast mentioned that NTC has plans on continuing to improve educational opportunities for students, but if those opportunities are not accessible due to broadband limitations, then those efforts do not matter.
- **Ann Herder-Rapp** connected the broadband issue to her sociology background and expressed specific interest in making sure we are supporting the rural areas in Marathon County. She said that in her work as an educator, she unfortunately must always ask if students have reliable internet as she plans opportunities and lessons.

- **Milt Olson** said that in the Town of Weston they spent \$50,000 to improve internet access, and they still have dead spots. He noted that Frontier is putting in pipelines, and that having reliable internet really does enhance property value
- **Dan Paul** provides web content in the work that he does and stated that he wants local people to view this content as much as possible. Since much of his work is locally focused, he would love to see more of Marathon County online.
- **Kat Becker** described her experience with broadband access in Athens as “terrible.” She has explored options through many companies over the years. She mentioned that cell service and internet are intertwined, and that some areas have NO access. Becker stated that “it’s hard to have to ‘take one for the team’ and know that your kids won’t have the same resources as others.” She asked if there are opportunities where counties could work together, since there may be structures already in place near county lines that could be utilized by many. She currently pays \$170 per month for internet.
- **Eric Budleski** said that he has a great interest in this issue. He lives in the DCE school district where he has two daughters enrolled. Budleski has worked with others in his local community to try to improve the service near their homes. He felt that in some cases, community leaders may not understand the need in smaller, more rural, areas. He pays \$150-175 per month in internet costs and does not have an option to access internet in town like others might (i.e. at an office or school). He has even considered building his own tower to bring internet to the Town of Reed. He asked Frontier about costs to run lines, and they indicated that it would be approximately \$22,000 for fiber for 2,000 ft. Budleski is considering paying for this because it will improve the value of their homes in Reed. He stated that this really is a defining moment for our children who may be left behind when they do not have proper internet access for education. Budleski indicated high quality, reliable broadband access is a luxury right now, but agreed with Gilmore that we should be viewing this service as a necessity or utility.
- **Dennis Bangert** wants to see Marathon County keep small business and farms in their communities. Providing reliable technology is essential for retaining educated people in our area. Bangert stated that we have blown by some of the technology included in the 2009 report, and that we need to consider the next “advent of technology.” Where he lives, they have Charter and Frontier cables lines that run through, but they cannot get either service. **Sara Guild** wondered where we can anticipate things going from here. “Where have other counties gone, and can we emulate that?”
- **Mang Xiong** stated that she is always interested in community development issues, and that broadband is an important one.
- **Scott Winch** from Stratford Schools participated in the conversation remotely.
- **First question: What kind of progress have we seen have we seen on broadband development? Have we observed any progress with respect to...**
 - **Access (service options and affordability)?**
 - **Subscribership?**
 - **Education?**
 - **Productivity of use?**
 - **Other aspects of broadband development?**
 - Paul mentioned that access has improved steadily from an urban standpoint and feels like progress has slowly been made in his area.

- Budleski felt that we have been servicing the urban areas far too much, but what about the other parts of the county? He stated that costs have gone up with improved speed, but the service has remained the same in some cases.
- Becker said that she moved to Athens in 2006 and thinks that the service has improved since that time. She stated that the quality of the service is better but that the dependability is low, and that in her area she does not get a consistent product. She said that there is access where she, personally, lives and that she does not have to drive to the public library to do work like others in her community might. Becker stressed that the PRODUCT IS NOT CONSISTANT, due to weather changes, times of the day, and remaining “dead spots.” This is an issue all over the place. She also noted that they had great service in 2010, but that it is not as good now.
- Gilmore has seen progress at their DCE schools, primarily because THEY made an investment to provide access. They also keep their school libraries and other areas open after hours so that kids and parents can use the internet. They learned that people were coming to their parking lots to use school internet to complete work, so they now keep their buildings open longer. Gilmore feels that they still have not really made “progress” because INEQUITY has increased. She stated that we are creating a social issue for kids. Today, youth meet up through Snapchat or other platforms, and it’s tough when some individuals need to go to road to find out where they are supposed to meet someone, where they are to go, and when they will be picked up.
- Bangert has not seen a new line being trenched in in rural areas in a LONG time. Placing lines in rural areas does not go in as fast as it does in urban areas. He mentioned that the infrastructure investment in rural areas is seemingly not as high.
- Paul noted that perhaps we need to consider “leapfrogging the trenching thing.” That this might be outdated in the near future.
- Budleski mentioned that we need to consider the existing infrastructure. He still needs a landline because cell service has gone dramatically down due to the multitude of devices people have today. Service providers like Frontier and AT&T are happy with their return on investment, so they don’t want to do any more to improve on what is already there.
- Olson observed that the Town of Hewitt has been putting in lines this summer. He is not sure that Frontier is hitting the federal broadband standard of 25 – they’re willing to fund 10. He said that copper is SO slow, and that there has been investment, but that it is not up to where it should be. Olson feels that we are 5 years behind on putting the funding to use.
- Becker mentioned that in her area there are all of these “weird random companies.” She said that AT&T seems to be the most expensive, but is the only one that she can use. She indicated that the cheap services available in urban areas are not an option for families living in rural areas, so they must pay more. Some companies have dropped towers because there are not enough people using them, so our rural areas in Marathon County are SUPER unpredictable. Becker said that in some cases there may not be other options for families if something goes out in an area.
- Gilmore mentioned that when Charter goes out in urban areas, they experience the same thing. She wondered whether we are currently supporting our farmers and entrepreneurs with technology. We say we are doing this, but we may not be supporting them like we think.

- Winch messaged in to the group that they are seeing the same issues mentioned in rural schools in Stratford.
 - Gast said they are experiencing a similar situation at NTC. They have expanded their library hours for people to access the internet because they cannot at home. NTC now has something called “Home IVC” where student can gain the same experience they would in the classroom, but the barrier is that people cannot access that product in their home due to poor, or no, internet services. In some cases, his students have had to drive somewhere at 10 pm to access internet. This is a problem, especially if these students have children at home.
 - Budleski said that their family exceeds their data limit every month, and that these data caps are brutal.
 - Becker worries about “consistency.” Rural schools have been slashed dramatically in funding in recent years, which has moved the schools backwards. In her area there is now no Spanish teacher, so the only options for children wanting to learn more are to connect with resources remotely. Since educational options in rural schools are more limited than what they were in the past, the stakes for children have become greater. In Athens, 15 years ago, there were more options for in-person classes, but now those options have moved online. Unfortunately, some kids cannot access these options in small communities.
 - Nathan Sandwick agreed that progress has been uneven.
 - Guild stated that what she was hearing is that opportunities have increased dramatically, but if you are in rural areas you are getting farther and farther behind, because the inequity has been growing.
 - Gilmore said that we are really discussing losing people in our area. She stated that people want jobs elsewhere but choose to live here when they can work for those places from home. If we cannot support living here and working from home, because people cannot get reliable internet, then we will lose those people.
 - Herder-Rapp mentioned the “boomerang effect,” which happens when people leave the community, but end up coming back because the proper resources are in place.
 - Budleski agreed that the quality of life is great here. “Technology exists, and we have to make this a priority.”
 - Herder-Rapp shared that when the people who bought their former home moved in, they were surprised at the lack of internet.
- ***Second Question: In light of that, and the fact that local governments are limited in their ability to directly provide the service, what do you want Marathon County to do to improve broadband service? (do we want a outline of what the county can/cannot do?)***
 - Sandwick supported this prompt by stating that we all have hopes, but to consider the realistic expectations.
 - Olson suggested that we facilitate and make available a map that could be used to direct the responsible use of the towers, buildings etc. that are already in existence in Marathon County and adjacent areas. Perhaps we could let providers know about these structures, and that they are available if they want to use them.
 - Karger wondered at what point the public-private balance is realistic, and that we have to work to figure that out.

- Becker stated that we could be engaging with the existing cooperative structures (i.e. Taylor Electric). Perhaps we could give people money for them to keep their silos up, instead of them paying someone to have them taken down. Becker suggested that there are potential ways to do this, by connecting with AgCounty or other cooperatives. She noted that private broadband businesses have never loved rural areas.
- Gilmore mentioned that we must have a facilitated plan to start with. We cannot rely on those people who have enough money to put a tower up in their neighborhood. We could establish a coalition to figure out the funding. We must prioritize, perhaps starting with improving cell service, or something along those lines. She feels that, “if you can have cell service in the Grand Canyon, you should be able to have cell service in Hewitt, Wisconsin.”
- Gast stressed that limited access is a barrier for businesses. Millennials are asking whether they can do their business from home, and we want to be able to say “yes we can” in Marathon County. Gast looks at this through a workforce development lens. We want to bring dollars to the area through business. Right now, workforce demographics are not positive through 2030. Investing in technology for the future (5G service) is something we should be considering. One of the biggest challenges in our county is geography. We are a large county, so trenching may not be the best option right now. There are options out there that are faster than broadband, and we need to be ahead of the curve. We are currently chasing this issue, and we need to move towards being AHEAD on this issue.
- Becker suggested that a starting point might be developing a comprehensive list of the service options in the area. This should be very easy and would perhaps help with recruiting people to places like Athens. This list could be used to negotiate property values as well. She agrees that a map for our own educational purposes that outlines access, where there are dead locations, etc. would be valuable.
- Gilmore said that the DCE district decided to use iPads, as opposed to Chromebooks or other options, so that the kids can download textbooks on the device to take home (textbooks are only available online in some cases). Some families don’t have access to internet at home, so the kids cannot do their work.
- Budleski wants the county to have a voice. He wants the county to be able to work with service providers so that we can stay ahead.
- Guild reminded everyone that the county cannot create a company to provide service. Gast asked whether we could partner with a company, and Guild indicated that they would investigate many options.
- Becker wondered how communities worked to encourage schools and other places to stay open later to let people in for internet access. Perhaps this information could be shared, and then other places near those facilities could also stay open so that people had access. Gilmore mentioned that they could do this with the Greenheck Fieldhouse, and that she had never thought of this. Becker suggested that businesses could promote reliable access, and then people would come in for lunch and use the free internet.
- Bangert asked Sandwick to draw a “line” on the whiteboard. The line was separated into three parts, labeled as the cost of material, labor, and the money a service provider wants to make/margin. Bangert mentioned that perhaps the county could invest in pieces of this “line” to bring the cost of reliable internet access down.

- Becker supported this idea and mentioned that this is why co-ops work so well. People want a good return on their money, and she described a situation where solar panels were established, and people could buy in to the option.
 - Budleski noted that he had considered whether wind towers would be high enough so that we could use them in multiple ways.
- ***Third Question: What would people, organizations and communities in Marathon County be able to do if everyone were able to use convenient, affordable High-Speed broadband? What does “High Speed” mean to you?***
 - Becker mentioned that it means entertainment for everyone, especially our elderly and youth populations. Entertainment in communities is important, and so we should not always consider Netflix as negative.
 - Budleski said that rural communities are now using doctors to reach out for visits.
 - Gilmore noted many of us now have family living in areas around the globe. Reliable internet allows us to connect with our loved ones everywhere. If we want to become a global society, and to be able to keep in touch with our family and friends around the world, this issue is incredibly important.
 - Olson included that this means increasing property values. Budleski said that in the Town of Reed, they had their property values lowered specifically because of bad internet.
 - Becker said that reliable broadband is crucial in the transition from dairy to other agriculture uses during this incredibly difficult time. Direct marketing for her own business is something that is very important. In her mind, “vibrant rural communities = vibrant agricultural businesses.”
 - Gilmore said that reliable broadband will increase entrepreneurial opportunities. Technology really is the tool that will move us into “the new.” It means that we will increase safety and access to medical support. It means that we will increase opportunities for higher education. The DCE District is now part of a national digital organization, and they have great need to provide access outside of their school walls. Now, kids can take any language they would like, and can even access additional learning resources offered by places like Kahn Academy. It really is a serious issue when people cannot afford to keep their landline phone, but then they have to walk out onto the road to dial 911 from a cell phone.
 - Gast mentioned that as a bicyclist his phone is his “safety net.” In some areas of Marathon County, he has zero access to medical services because he cannot dial 911 from a cell phone, due to no service.
 - Becker said that in many cases, the internet is connected to the phone. These are all overlapping forms of communication, and we need to have them all to communicate effectively.
 - Gast stressed the healthcare angle. Stroke resources and support north of Hwy 10 is non-existent and psychiatry services are also lacking. The goal of Healthy Marathon County is to be #1, and we need affordable, reliable broadband to accomplish this. Proper services will attract people to our state, and action must be a priority, or it will be devastating to our area.
 - Winch added that by not having homes in Marathon County equipped with broadband has set limits on what students can do outside of the school day.

- Xiong asked, “what is high speed?” To her it means fast, convenient, quality services. We need access to fast service, because right now families and business are not getting it. Some of the business people she works with do not even know here the public library is to use their internet. They may not have funds to pay for cell service or internet. This effort really needs to focus on providing access to everything since technology is intertwined.
- Gilmore mentioned that YouTube is a great source of information (for example, when your washer breaks down, that’s the first place we all go). We cannot just consider “text” when we talk about “fast internet.” We need to make sure that we are providing access to everything out there.
- Guild asked, “what is a minimum speed? How would you know when Marathon County is #1 in access?”
 - Becker, half-jokingly, stated that she will know it when people don’t have to wander around their yard to download PDF file. She also mentioned that providing families with choices will be important.
 - Paul said that a 20 MB download per second is fast and reliable for him.
 - Gilmore noted that rural Arizona has much better service than us. We should be able to provide a faster service.
 - Budleski said that the federal expectation of 25 is still too low. He would say that 40 megs is ideal, and he would expect this. He wants to see a day when all of his family members can be online and they do not experience a slowdown. Of course, there needs to be an adjustment for the rural context.
 - Gilmore has noticed slowdowns when tourists travel through the area and are sucking service from towers in Rib Mountain. This is another thing that we will need to consider as we plan.
 - Paul asked the question, “What if a gigabyte does not even exist in the future??” We need to consider this from all angles.
- **Fourth Question: What do you see as barriers to improving high-speed broadband in Marathon County?**
 - **Cost?**
 - **Take rate?**
 - Hausler asked the group to write down their thoughts on the notecards provided. How much is too much when it comes to cost? Do you have any other ideas?
 - Gilmore reminded everyone that “you don’t know what you don’t know.” She provided the example that they now pay \$450 for cell phone service for their entire family PER MONTH. If you would have asked her 10 years ago if she would be paying this amount she would have told you that you were crazy! Our perspectives shift.
 - Becker said that it needs to be reasonable. Youth should have reasonable access. If you are eligible for free/reduced lunch, perhaps these families are also provided “hot spots.”

Sandwick provided a brief summary of what he picked up on during the meeting. Some of the trends he heard included:

- Broadband is presently not reaching everyone – that there is inequity.
- There are challenges to broadband consistency.
- There is some county responsibility.

- There is much we could do if services were widely available.

Hausler stated that we could go on with this discussion for a long time. We are just beginning at the floor level.

Where does this go next? He let participants know that we will be reviewing the notes and will share what was discussed. With this information, the county can move forward in developing a plan, and will have a targeted group be the driving force of the efforts. UW-Extension will help pull folks together to keep moving Marathon County's broadband effort forward.

Karger mentioned that this is a political issue. Most of the folks in our county live in urban areas. We are now beyond that, and we realize that we will sink or swim together. We own public safety towers but will have to consider a tight security system. This issue is not as simple as we think. We know we need to do this, but the question is "how?" This will help in determining priorities.

Olson said that if the county comes up with a map of high points where towers could be established, it could be valuable.

Guild described lasers, netting, etc. as a few "new" ideas coming on to the scene. She said that there are many other options out there, so we will need to bring in experts to consider what is adaptable to our county's needs. The experts will likely know about things we have not even considered. We will bring in governments from across the county to help us develop this over the coming months.

Herder-Rapp said that there is now a higher level of tolerance for paying more for these types of services. We have detached other things, like our landlines, for new technologies. We will pay more to get something good out of it.

Paul said that some people in Marathon County have replaced grocery bills with technology bills. They would rather starve.