

RESOLUTION NO. 2023-05

A RESOLUTION TO ADOPT THE OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BROADBAND ADVISORY WORKGROUP

WHEREAS, the City Council directed the administration to create an Ad Hoc Broadband Advisory Workgroup to advise the city of policy considerations regarding municipal broadband and adopted Resolution 2020-31 on August 24, 2020; and

WHEREAS, the Workgroup met over 20 months at the request of City Council to address tasks identified in Resolution 2020-31; and

WHEREAS, the Workgroup established goals for broadband services in the City; and

WHEREAS, Bellingham has a highly competitive marketplace with different types of broadband services; and

WHEREAS, digitally connected residents benefit the whole community, however not everyone in Bellingham has access to the internet despite the fact that internet is available from multiple Internet Service Providers (ISPs); and

WHEREAS, digital equity is a priority and access is the primary challenge; and

WHEREAS, the primary barriers to access include the inability to pay for service, and/or inadequate computer technology and digital skills, [and/or relevancy of (need for?) internet access in daily life; and

WHEREAS, in Bellingham, based on the 2021 census and calculated is 2020 dollars, the per capita income was \$32,419 and the median household income was \$56,198, and

WHEREAS, based on the 2021 census, 20% of the people in Bellingham live in poverty; and

WHEREAS, the City of Bellingham provides free public access to computers and the Internet on a limited basis; and

WHEREAS, the current state standard for broadband speeds is 100/20 Mbps; and

WHEREAS, the City's municipal network, which has been developed over more than 30 years, is not designed to be consumer, enterprise or carrier grade. Also, the network is not optimized for performance, reduced maintenance tasks, and redundancy to enable maximum network reliability and minimal downtime; and

WHEREAS, the City's current municipal network reliably:

- a. Supports many critical City services such as fire, police, water, wastewater, streetlights, traffic lights as well as connecting City buildings to the network;
- b. Provides services to Bellingham Public Schools and Whatcom Transit Authority (WTA); and

- c. Supports the Whatcom Regional 911 services and the Whatcom County Sheriff's Emergency Operations Center (EOC); and

WHEREAS, the City has network engineering staff, but has no dedicated staff resources to support the City's broadband network; and

WHEREAS, the City retained a consultant whose report provided information regarding the City's current network and options for the future; and

WHEREAS, the consultant described a range of municipal broadband models from providing basic public policy to a full retail model including a city-wide fiber to the home (FTTH) network. The consultant found that a plan to provide a full retail FTTH network would be extremely expensive and the debt service to build such network would be unsustainable; and

WHEREAS, the consultant's report provided the following observations regarding the City's role in providing broadband services:

- a. The City network provides a "backbone" opportunity with the capacity to increase services to citizens and businesses through a variety of business models that have the potential to generate revenue for the City (See report Executive Summary, Section 4, and Conclusions and Recommendations);
- b. The City should improve the City's infrastructure by adding redundancy and hardening;
- c. The City should adopt an "Infrastructure Only" model to provide conduit and/or dark fiber to businesses, broadband providers, and other public organizations;
- d. The City's fiber network could be used to improve service to less affluent neighborhoods; and
- e. New taxes may not be required to support improving service and access; and

WHEREAS, the consultant conducted a public survey of broadband users in the city. (See Community Survey results on page 9 of the report.) From the survey the consultant concluded

- a. Data from the survey indicates that lower speed connections are dispersed throughout the City and do not point to any specific neighborhoods or areas that are underserved compared to their surroundings;
- b. Forty six percent of survey respondents rated Price as either Bad or Terrible;
- c. Similarly, 42.7% rated Customer Service & Support as Bad or Terrible;
- d. Eighty-two (82) percent of the survey respondents are currently served by one private internet service provider (ISP);
- e. The survey did not provide adequate information regarding business satisfaction with current broadband quality of service; and
- f. Inadequate information was collected from people who don't have access to the internet; and

WHEREAS, funding from State and Federal sources may be available to assist the City with achieving equitable and affordable broadband throughout the City; and

WHEREAS, there are opportunities for the City to collaborate with the Port of Bellingham and the Whatcom Public Utility District (PUD) to continue to learn, understand, and share knowledge regarding each other's broadband strategies and plans; and

WHEREAS, there are opportunities for the City to collaborate with ISPs to improve service and generate revenue for the City; and

WHEREAS, the Workgroup identified a need for additional information, including but not limited to:

- a. Data regarding unserved and underserved members of the community, including barriers to technology adoption and adoption rates, access challenges, and affordability;
- b. A financial analysis sufficient to make an educated/informed decision regarding business models other than the City as retail provider of FTTH;
- c. Realistic estimates of anticipated uptake numbers assumed for a city-wide FTTH scenario. (Uptake means: The rate of user/customer acquisition by an ISP as a percentage of total number of users/customers in the service area.);
- d. The potential opportunities of the City collaborating with ISPs to achieve the City's goals;
- e. Monitor outcomes of efforts in communities similar to Bellingham to develop community broadband systems providing benchmarks such as price, speed, number of plans for comparison;
- f. The concerns expressed by businesses in our community about the level of service or quality of service;
- g. Opportunities and future plans of private ISPs providing service in the community.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF BELLINGHAM THAT:

The Broadband Advisory Workgroup's recommendations are adopted as follows:

1. The City should establish the following goals for broadband services in the City of Bellingham:
 - a. Residents should have nondiscriminatory access to the information resources necessary to achieve digital equity.
 - b. Ensure a broadband speed for residents (housed and unhoused), visitors, and businesses of 150/150 Mbps is always available and scalable, with a minimum target of 1 Gbps symmetrical service by 2028. The current state standard for broadband speeds is 100/20 Mbps.
 - c. Provide broadband services that are available for residents (housed and unhoused), visitors, and businesses through access points such as residences, libraries, public facilities, parks, schools, shelters, and service agencies and organizations.
 - d. Ensure broadband services be cost-competitive with reasonable rates based on those achieved by other comparable US cities (by the metric of Gbps/month/\$).

- e. Assure quality broadband service for all based on the residents' or business' choice of service level.
2. The City should develop, implement, and seek funding to support a digital equity broadband adoption plan to provide the kind of broadband connection and support individuals need with a focus on unserved and underserved members of the community, including the "missing middle". The plan should identify:
 - a. Barriers faced by unserved and underserved members of the community;
 - b. Opportunities for collaboration with others in the community including non-profits, ISPs, and the library to provide a program for unserved and underserved members of the community to:
 - i. Improve internet literacy and access,
 - ii. Establish a "navigators" program modeled after the program through the State Broadband Office, and
 - iii. Help members of the community find ways to qualify for support programs and get access;
 - c. Options to support the digital equity broadband adoption plan as funding becomes available.
 3. The City should develop a comprehensive capital and operations plan:
 - a. To increase redundancy and reliability in the City's existing system,
 - b. To expand the use of the system following an "Infrastructure Only" model,
 - c. To expand publicly accessible WIFI, and
 - d. To partner with other agencies and ISPs.


The Infrastructure Only model envisions the development of "carrier class" infrastructure for managing the improved municipal broadband network. It also expands and improves the network's broadband capacity and services in a financially self-sustaining manner by providing leased conduit and/or dark fiber access to businesses, broadband providers, and other public organizations.

To accomplish this, the City should:

- a. Consider developing an interlocal agreement between the City, Whatcom County, Port of Bellingham, and the Whatcom PUD to support and expand broadband Internet service availability in the region;
- b. Explore expansion of the City's publicly accessible WIFI hotspots at City-owned facilities to provide free and open internet access to residents and visitors to the city;
- c. Continue to engage with local private ISPs to identify opportunities to collaborate on improving service and sharing resources; and
- d. Include the following elements in its comprehensive capital and operations plan:
 - i. Documentation of all existing infrastructure;
 - ii. Identification of locations for new and replacement infrastructure;
 - iii. Identification of operational resources to support this infrastructure adhering to data privacy and cyber security best practices;


- iv. Identification of resources to retain, replace and renew this infrastructure;
 - v. Completion of a financial analysis of operating, capital investment and renewal costs and revenue potential, and recommendations on fees to ensure financial sustainability; and
 - vi. Identification of opportunities to invest to serve the unserved and underserved members of the community; and
4. The City should revise and update existing agreements with partner agencies for the current system to meet the goals of the resolution and serve the needs of the network users;
5. The City should conduct a survey of businesses in the city to determine their current and future needs for broadband services;
6. The City should consider a future role for the current Broadband Advisory Workgroup.

PASSED by the Council this 8th day of May, 2023.



Council President


APPROVED by me this 25th day of May, 2023.



Mayor

ATTEST: 

Finance Director

APPROVED AS TO FORM:


Office of the City Attorney