To: The Select Board and Residents of Liberty

From: Joe Meadows

Liberty Director, Waldo Broadband Corporation

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

**Dear Friends and Neighbors,**

**Earlier today (Tuesday, December 12), the Maine Connectivity Authority awarded the Waldo Broadband Corporation (WBC) and Direct Communications Rockland (DCR) a grant to build a fiber optic, broadband internet network for the residents of Freedom, Liberty, Montville, Palermo, and Searsmont**. **This network, to be constructed over the next two years at an estimated cost of over $15 million, will make fiber optic broadband internet available to the residents of all five towns. Furthermore, we are happy to announce that the cost to subscribers to obtain service will be among the lowest available anywhere in Maine, at $39.95/month for 100 megabits per second service (both upload and download) with even faster speeds of up to at least 1 gigabit per second available for a bit more, if desired. Ensuring affordability for our residents was a top priority of the WBC Board of Directors as we spoke with potential partners, so we are especially happy that the new network will be available at such an affordable price.**

Creating this network has been the goal of many volunteers and community leaders for more than three years, starting with the Southwestern Waldo County Broadband Coalition, and later through formation of the WBC by the five towns, in 2022. We should all be proud to know that this hard work and cooperation, by some many volunteers, has been well worth it. The WBC Board is confident that this broadband network will help bring better jobs, improved educational opportunities, telehealth, and many other benefits to our residents, and allow us to better compete with the rest of the world in many, many ways.

DCR (the company that purchased Unity-based Unitel a few years ago) will own and operate the network and will be investing more than $4.5 million into its creation, on top of the more than $10.8 million in grant money awarded today. The Board of Directors of the WBC worked very hard to find a partner that would allow us to protect the interests of our residents by avoiding tax increases or debt that we did not believe our towns could safely support or sustain. I am happy to report that because of this, **the residents of our towns won’t be required to pay a penny toward building or maintaining this network, other than subscriber fees to obtain service for those that desire it**. Coupled with low fees for service, avoiding higher taxes and debt to build and maintain the network will help ensure the health and viability of our communities, so we are very proud of this accomplishment. No one will be forced to subscribe, of course, but we certainly hope and think most residents will find the service is a real bargain.

It’s likely to take up to a couple of years to get the full network built, but construction is expected to start in the first half of 2024, once the weather turns warmer. Residents will be able to “get on the list” for service starting in just a few weeks, and DCR and WBC will make information about that available soon (keep an eye on our website at waldobroadband.org). DCR and WBC will be working with the Maine Connectivity Authority to finalize the terms of the contract that allows for receipt of the grant over the next several weeks. Based on what we’re seeing from other communities where other, smaller grants were awarded earlier this year, it will likely take until about the end of mud season to finalize that contract, so we’re all going to need to be just a little bit patient. It will also take some time to finalize contracts with the companies that own utility poles across our towns, but we’re hopeful that those discussions will go smoothly. CMP has already expressed a strong interest in working with us, which is very encouraging. **Based on what we know today, we think that residents along some of the “main roads” in our towns will have service available by early in the latter half of 2024. Most of us will probably get service later in 2024 or into 2025. Some hard-to-reach places may be delayed a bit later, but those situations should be rare. Bottom line: Most of us should have a fast, affordable, reliable internet connection available within two years from today, and if we’re lucky, a bit sooner.**

The not-for-profit Waldo Broadband Corporation (WBC), made up of Freedom, Liberty, Montville, Palermo, and Searsmont as the “members”, will continue to exist for at least the next few years. The WBC Board will serve as the liaison group with DCR, representing the towns, while also helping to ensure that residents of our communities are able to make use of this important new service to access jobs, education, telehealth, and other important services. If the Select Board wants me to continue serving as our volunteer director on the Board, I’m happy to do so for at least the remainder of my term. But if someone else wants to serve, please let the Select Board know. It doesn’t pay anything, but you sure get a nice sense of satisfaction when you get to share good news like this grant award, and the creation of this network!

**If you have questions about any of this, please visit the WBC website at waldobroadband.org in a few days, where we’ll be posting updates as we have news.** We also plan to hold informational meetings from time to time in each town to help keep everyone updated on progress. Until then, take pride in what your hard work and support has accomplished, and know that soon, our town and those around us will have fast, reliable, affordable internet available. Thanks for helping to make that possible.

Joe Meadows

Liberty Director (volunteer)

Waldo Broadband Corporation