

So, When WILL We Get Broadband?

An Update to the Select Board and Citizens of Liberty

June 5, 2024

If you ask the Maine Connectivity Authority (the state agency responsible for administering broadband grant money) and Direct Communications (the company that will build, own, and run the network, and no, not in any way connected to the satellite TV provider that also has “Direct” in their name) whether the grant to bring fiber optic broadband to Liberty and four other Waldo County towns is still on track, you’ll hear “*Absolutely! It’s even moving faster than the first round of grants awarded.*” However, given that we don’t yet see trucks installing fiber in our towns, I can see how people are a bit skeptical of that. Here’s an update on all that. Apologies that you have to read a few paragraphs, but it’s best you have a few details if you truly want to understand what feels like a slow process to most of us.

There are two things that make this process move much slower than any of us would like (and longer than those of us who have been working on this for several years as volunteers, had hoped). The first is that we’re dealing with the federal government being the ultimate source of those grant funds (well, that’s actually all of us as taxpayers, but the government is running the show in terms of handing out the money and creating the rules around that). They dole that money out by creating a *lot* of rules and regulations, and then by turning the money, along with those rules and regulations, over to an arm of state government, who then finally hands all that over to Direct Communications to do the actual work. As most of us have come to realize over the years, the government isn’t generally known for being fast, particularly when they’re doing things for the first time or two, and that’s been the case here. So, **while the grant money has been awarded, the process of having various government entities create (and sometimes change, in midstream) the process for getting that money down to the company doing the work, including all the paperwork involved, has taken many months from the time the grant was actually awarded.** We’re told, however, that that process is actually working better than it did the first time all this was done, and that it will be done sometime in the next few weeks, in terms of making the first chunk of that money available. So, that’s good news. But no, trucks won’t yet start to roll, because of the second big thing that takes time to complete.

That second thing is that **Direct Communications must also complete a process called “pole licensing” with both CMP and Consolidated Communications, for more than 7,000 poles on which the fiber will be installed in our towns.** And yes, sometimes agreements must be reached for individual poles, so that process can take months as well.

Basically, we're told that those utilities are required to allow use of their poles for broadband, so that will happen. But they're big companies with a lot of people who need to sign off on things. So, even when they have the best of intentions and want to fully cooperate, which we think is largely the case for our towns, it's not nearly as fast as most of us might assume. The process is well underway while the grant money paperwork is being finalized, but it takes months to complete it.

So, when WILL we likely see this new broadband network? **My best guess – and let me say, that's the best I can offer right now – is that most of us will have an opportunity to have broadband installed in 2025, and for some of us, it will likely be 2026.** If we're really lucky a few of us might see something happen this year, but I'm not counting on that. That's not as fast as we'd like, but "it is what it is", and there doesn't appear to be anything we can do to speed that up. Just like you, those of us who have been volunteering to see this thing through are waiting, and waiting, and waiting.

On the "plus side", Direct Communications has announced prices that start as low as \$29.95/month if you set up autopay with them (\$34.95/month if you don't). And if you sign up during the official installation period, that installation will be free for almost everyone (some exceptions apply such as wanting the installation done in a certain way, but we think Direct is being very reasonable in their approach). That's a great price for 300/300 mbps service (download and upload speed). For a bit more money, they plan to offer service as fast as 1 gbps. You can find out more (and get on the list for future installation) by going to their website at <https://directcom.com>. You can also visit the website of our non-profit Waldo Broadband Corporation (WBC) at <https://waldobroadband.org>, where we post information from time to time. As you may recall, WBC is the non-profit broadband utility district formed by the towns to help make the broadband grant happen. I'm Liberty's volunteer director on that non-profit board, which is why I'm writing this update. We're going to need additional volunteers in coming months to help our communities and residents make great use of the new network, so if you're interested in serving, please let me know).

Anyway, now you know what I know. They say patience is a virtue. I'm not sure that's true based on some of the things I've probably muttered under my breath about how long things are taking, but in the long run, I think we'll all be glad when we finally get this new service. It's coming, folks. It's just not happening nearly as fast as we'd all like to see it.

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