



CVFiber Policy Committee Draft Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 5:00 PM - 6:00 PM
Virtual meeting

Present: Allen Gilbert (Worcester), Linda Gravell (Waterbury), John Morris (Marshfield), Ray Pelletier (Northfield), and Siobhan Perricone (Orange); and Jennille Smith, executive director.

- 1. Call to order.** A quorum being present, the meeting was called to order at 5:05 p.m. by Gilbert, chair. He noted that Alexis Julian, who has been serving as a public member, has resigned from the committee because of changes in her work schedule. She thanked CVFiber for the opportunity to take part in our work and wished us great success. Gilbert noted that with five members, the committee quorum is now three members.
- 2. Changes to agenda.** There were none.
- 3. Public comment.** There was none.
- 4. Approval of draft minutes for Dec. 6, 2022 special meeting.** Gravell moved, Perricone seconded, to approve the minutes as presented. Approval unanimous.
- 5. Consideration of a CVFiber Equitable Access to Broadband Policy.** Gilbert noted that the committee has talked generally about this topic but hasn't put anything in writing. He thought CVFiber should have an equity policy in place before it begins providing service on the first loop of the network. He said he had the impression everyone on the committee felt that digital equity was an important issue for CVFiber. He noted he has become familiar with the work that both the Vermont and national League of Women Voters have done in the

last year to stress the importance of not just access to high-speed internet, but of affordable subscription plans and of ability to navigate the web and take advantage of the opportunities it provides. He said he's attended webinars of national groups the League of Women Voters is working with, and has been impressed by the energy and commitment that's being put towards digital equity issues. The affordability issue is probably of most immediate importance. He mentioned the subscription subsidies available through the Federal Communications Commission's Affordability Connectivity Program and said that in Vermont, a minority of eligible households take advantage of the assistance. Money is being left on the table, he said. Helping people sign up for the program, as well as helping them make the most of their access to high-speed internet, should be important goals for CVFiber. If we are to ask the towns in our district to allocate more of their federal ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds to CVFiber, those funds should be used to help low-income customers get connected to our system.

Gilbert had earlier sent committee members a draft of a Digital Equity statement that he said could be the starting point for developing a policy. There was no consensus on how to move forward. He invited other committee members to come to the committee's next meeting with their ideas for a policy.

- 6. Use of town ARPA funds to support broadband affordability.** Gravell said she is attending her town meeting in Waterbury next week and will ask from the floor that the town commit another \$50,000 of its ARPA funds to help pay for customer connections to the system. She said such a direct approach is necessary because the town select board members are not interested in providing any more funds for connections. "They have a different outlook on affordability vs. underserved/unserved," she said. Appealing directly to townspeople is the only way to try to get more support, she said. Pelletier said that CVFiber is a business. "Access for us is running a wire past your home," he said, quoting a CUD director in another part of the state. CVFiber is paying our service provider, Waitsfield Champlain Valley Telecommunications, \$1,500 to make each (aerial) connection to a residence, he noted. He said CVFiber is facing significant financial challenges, and that any revenue we may take in this year from our initial subscribers in our Phase 1 areas will be a miniscule amount towards what we need in order to build the whole system. Perricone said that "subsidizing the poor to get connections for free is not going to fly in my town. The town is happy to help pay for stringing wires through town, but they're not interested in helping to pay to connect poor customers." Morris said "We should focus on what we are doing – getting wires to people's houses. Equity is something we should be working on in a separate track." Perricone agreed. She would like us to approach equity efforts the way ECFiber has done – through a

separate entity (Equal Access to Broadband) that has its own funding stream (which includes a yearly sum from ECFiber's subscription revenue).

Smith said that she's been spending time to try to understand the challenges many of our customers face, and she's been overwhelmed by the complications of some situations. It's everything from low levels of technological understanding to people who think that when you ask for a number to contact them, they respond not with their phone number but with some other unrelated number. Smith said that she will email to committee members some ideas she's been developing to make the argument that towns should provide an ARPA top-off allocation for affordability.

7. Equity in support of aerial and underground fiber connections. Gilbert explained that he felt CVFiber's paying for overhead connections to people's home while providing no level of assistance for customers who want an underground connection wasn't fair. CVFiber should provide the \$1,500 that we would have paid WCVT for the aerial connection to homeowners who must, at their expense, hire a contractor to build a trench for an underground connection. He also pointed out that CVFiber and WCVT benefit from underground connections because they are less likely to suffer the expensive damage an aerial connection may sustain in storms. Pelletier said in both cases, CVFiber is paying WCVT \$1,500 to connect the fiber cable – at the pole and at the residence. The digging of a trench and laying of a conduit are different matters and are solely the homeowner's responsibility. Morris agreed with Pelletier that it's equitable between the two kinds of connections, since WCVT will be pulling the fiber through the conduit instead of hanging it above ground.

8. Other business. There was none.

9. Adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 6:05 p.m.

-- Allen Gilbert

Approved April 5, 2023