

Broadband – Maine’s Bridge to the Future

By the Camden / Rockport Broadband Task Force

The Town of Rockport was forward thinking when it became the first Maine community to build a municipally-owned fiber optic network that serves the Town’s offices, Maine Media and certain businesses. But bringing high-speed broadband to the region’s homes and businesses beyond that one-mile network has remained elusive.

The technology is still the gold standard and is still what we should be striving to deliver to our residents. Camden and Rockport have joined together to form the Camden Rockport Broadband Task Force and are encouraging neighboring towns to join our efforts. This will enable us to design a network, carefully consider its economic viability, prepare a request for proposals to potential vendors and obtain bids. Once we get the proposals back from the internet providers, we can then engage in an informed discussion about how to pay for such a network and how to structure the ownership of it.

Some Town officials believe that the time is ripe to build a network without raising taxes. That’s what Calais and Baileyville have done – and Millinocket and East Millinocket are going down a similar path. Other New England towns and states have pursued similar creative approaches.

Using Calais and Baileyville as an example, the towns formed a regional utility commission which then obtained various sources of funding including low-cost municipal loans to fund the commission. Other towns have issued revenue bonds. The bottom line is that towns have pursued innovative approaches to build high-speed internet networks without raising taxes and without recourse to the taxpayers in the event of failure. These efforts have sometimes been so successful that surrounding towns jump on board to join the effort.

If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is the need to have telehealth so that we can access health care from not only the comfort but the safety of our own homes. It has taught us the need to have strong educational opportunities available to our children, whether they are learning from home or in a classroom. And for every one of us still working – it has taught us how critical it is to keep the economic engine of our nation and our communities going, strong and vibrant, whether we are working in an office or from our homes. As employers have realized that they don’t need a highly centralized workforce in an expensive urban location, executives and workers at all levels are realizing that they can work where they want to live – instead of living where they have to work. This is what economic growth looks like for Maine – a prosperity that will benefit us all.

We urge you to visit the Maine Broadband Coalition website at <https://www.mainebroadbandcoalition.org/>. See for yourself how Albert Carver, owner of A.C. Inc. seafood company in Beals Island, Maine expanded his employees from 12 to 40, and grew his business from \$2 million to \$40 million – both of which he attributes to the availability of high-speed internet. Albert says this would not have been possible without broadband – because it has opened his company to the entire world.

Also check out Scott Bailey, a senior with congestive heart failure who has been able to stay out of the hospital and other medical facilities through high-speed internet that allows his medical professionals to monitor and care for him from his own home. Not only has it improved his quality of life, it has actually improved his health.

Just as past centuries required railroads, navigable rivers, and adequate roads to grow the economy that has made this nation what it is today, we must have reliable high-speed internet connections to the world in order to improve our economic prospects for today and tomorrow. The benefits of high-speed internet are real – for every one of us – and they are a generational investment that we cannot afford not to make.