

Camden Rotary Club Explores the Potential of Universal Broadband Internet Access for the Mid-Coast

CAMDEN – February 23, 2021 -- What are the prospects for expanding broadband access in Mid-Coast Maine? And what would be the advantages of doing so? The Camden Rotary Club hosted a recent meeting on this topic, one of many the club is examining to learn about local economic challenges and foster potential solutions.

The guest speaker, [Mid-Coast Broadband Coalition](#) Chair Debra Hall, described the successful installation in 2014 of a 1.5-mile municipal fiber-optic broadband network in [Rockport](#). She then talked about the more recent establishment of the coalition, which aims to expand internet access throughout the region.

The coalition is raising funds for a feasibility study and design of a system that would bring the advantages of fiber-optic cable and other technologies to towns and rural areas. It includes select board members, technology consultants and citizens from Camden, Rockport, Hope, Lincolnville, Northport, Rockland, South Thomaston, and Thomaston. Representatives of other towns are welcome to join, too. Coalition members regard universal broadband access as a means of expanding educational and economic opportunities, making telehealth more available to seniors, and attracting young families and a vibrant workforce to the area.

“Access to high-speed internet is an essential driver of today’s economy and social fabric,” said Hall. “We need smart, efficient, financially viable and creative means to ensure the availability of high-speed internet.” She noted that the COVID pandemic has made more people aware of the need for robust internet connections “not only in this region but across the nation. The internet is far more important than just accessing Netflix. We have seen a great influx of people moving into this area to work as big corporations shut down their operations in high-rise buildings and big cities.”

Regional broadband networks are beginning to spring up in the state. For example, Baileyville, Calais and Alexander have established the non-profit [Downeast Broadband Utility](#) to boost technological and economic growth. [Our Katahdin](#), a volunteer organization that promotes promote community and economic development, is working with Medway, East Millinocket, and Millinocket to create a vision for the future of broadband in the region and to begin implementation of the plan.

Hall indicated that fiber-optic cable offers symmetrical high-speed connections with fast, equal download and upload speeds. She described fiber as “ultimately the cheapest way of providing truly high-speed internet.” She pointed out that one strand of fiber is thinner than a human hair and can carry three billion phone calls or web sessions – and that the fiber-optic submarine cables that connect the continents are crucial to the world’s communication structure. Acknowledging that fiber-optic connections are not practical for some locales, Hall noted that other technologies such as 5G can complement (but not replace) it to reach places where the use of fiber is impractical.

Hall encouraged her listeners to take the Maine Broadband Coalition’s one-minute [Internet Speed Test](#). In addition to informing residents about their internet speed, the test will generate data to create a [comprehensive map](#) of accurate internet speeds throughout the state as opposed to speeds that current providers typically overstate. This effort will assist towns in obtaining grants for which they might not otherwise qualify based on previously reported speeds. Additional broadband information is available on the [Town of Rockport’s website](#). For people who want to learn more about the power of fiber optics, Hall recommended Susan Crawford’s book, *Fiber: The Coming Tech Revolution—and Why America Might Miss It*.

Hall's talk was the fifth in a monthly series about the local economy. Recordings of these talks are available via the club's library of recorded presentations at www.camdenrotary.org. Camden National Bank President and Chief Executive Officer Greg Dufour will present the next presentation in this series on March 16.

The club welcomes visitors at its weekly meetings, which take place Tuesdays at noon on Zoom. Anyone who would like to attend can obtain connection details from Stephanie Griffin: steph.griffinsg00@gmail.com

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Photo: Debra Hall

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