

## **Debra Hall Updates Camden Rotary Club on Community Broadband for the Midcoast**

CAMDEN – August 23, 2021 -- [Midcoast Internet Coalition](#) Chair Debra Hall returned to the Camden Rotary Club recently to update members on the coalition's work.

Since Hall first [addressed us in February](#), the coalition has created a nonprofit regional utility district, the Midcoast Internet Development Corporation (MIDC). The corporation is now raising private funds and securing grants to build an open-access fiber optics network for every home and business in the Midcoast.

Why make high-speed internet available for everyone? Because, as Hall says, it is as essential as roads and electricity. Broadband with equally high download and upload speeds can help businesses retain current employees and attract new ones. Telecommuters need these capabilities too. So do telehealth providers, patients, students, educational institutions, and many other individuals and organizations.

Hall explained that fiber-optic networks offer the best way to meet these needs.

"We all understand the benefits of high download speeds when streaming movies, but we need powerful upload speeds as well whether for Zoom calls, education, telehealth or remote work. And that calls for fiber. Of the various ways to access the internet, only fiber offers symmetrical, or equal, download and upload speeds. Low-orbiting Starlink satellites and telecoms' promises of potential 5G access are both reliant on robust fiber infrastructure. They cannot replace fiber."

MIDC plans to build a community-owned fiber network on which professional fiber internet providers will offer a symmetrical download/upload speed of 100 megabits per second, with an option of 1 gigabit for power users. The nonprofit corporation, formed by Camden and Rockport based on overwhelming voter support in June, also aims to provide reliability, affordability, and open access. Rockland and Thomaston city officials have also approved the measure and will soon be joining the nonprofit corporation. The MIDC will build and own the infrastructure without raising taxes, and internet providers will use the network to deliver their services to customers. More than 600 community networks already operate in 33 states. Many of them have been rated as the fastest and cheapest in the country. Maine has several already.

Public ownership of fiber is comparable to the public ownership of traditional infrastructure such as roads. Through this public/private partnership, private entities design and build the infrastructure, deliver services to customers on the network but at the end of the day they don't own the fiber networks just as private entities don't own our roads. This open access contrasts with the exclusivity of non-municipal networks where private telecoms have often been granted public money in Maine to own networks that only they can use and shut out competition, creating monopolies and higher prices for consumers.

The next steps for the new utility include feasibility studies for MIDC's member towns as well as surrounding towns hoping to be a part of the MIDC network. The studies will help towns understand building and operating costs as well as expected revenues. The utility is committed to building the network without taxpayer funds. It will offer universal access to all residences and businesses in the towns in which it builds, not limiting itself to higher-density areas as private telecoms have done.

"What we're all about in this coalition is bringing high-speed internet to the most underserved places," Hall said. "We will start with more densely populated areas and build up revenue that will enable us to expand to the more rural areas."

In answer to questions from the audience, Hall described the work that the MIDC is doing with the Camden Rotary, local internet service providers and the Maine School of Technology to create a 32-week apprentice program. The program will train fiber installers to provide the labor that the MIDC will need while creating jobs in the Midcoast region.

The corporation hopes to receive funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the US Economic Development Administration (EDA), the Maine Connectivity Authority, and private foundations. There is \$130 million or more coming to the state of Maine from ARPA for broadband in the form of the \$10 billion capital projects fund, and organizations like MIDC may be able to access federal infrastructure funding for broadband and digital equity efforts.

Hall's talk was part of a series the club is presenting on ways to promote economic and workforce development in the Midcoast. Recordings of all the presentations are available via the club's library of recorded presentations at [www.camdenrotary.org](http://www.camdenrotary.org). The club meets in person and online at noon every Tuesday. Visitors may attend at the First Congregational Church in Camden or on Zoom. For Zoom connection details, contact Stephanie French: [steph.griffinsg00@gmail.com](mailto:steph.griffinsg00@gmail.com)

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