

In Maine, Rockport and Camden Set Fiber Broadband Vision for Region

The two towns devise a plan to bridge the state's digital divide through collaboration, advanced tools and new federal and state funding.

By Sean Buckley / *Broadband Communities*

Like other popular tourist destinations, Camden and Rockport see broadband as a key amenity they need to thrive. The Mid-Coast Broadband Coalition is stepping up to the challenge, seeking to expand high-speed internet in the two Maine towns and throughout the Midcoast region by creating a regional utility.

Even before the coalition formed, Rockport was further ahead than other Maine communities in designing and implementing a broadband plan. In 2014, the town installed a 1.5-mile municipal fiber optic broadband network, which came to be through a public-private partnership with GWI and Maine Media University. It connected the municipal buildings and Maine Media, and was available to residents if they paid about \$1,000 per pole to their homes.

Now, the goal is to extend the network in Rockport and then in Camden to more homes and businesses. "Rockport has about 70 miles of roadway that would have to extend, and Camden has a similar number," says coalition chair Debra Hall. "The coalition is looking to expand the network on a regional basis because it's not cost-effective to do it on a community basis."

Determining desirable network features is key. "Camden and Rockport have been working behind the scenes educating ISPs and residents," she says. "We're at the stage where the coalition has drafted guiding principles stating that we want open access, a certain minimum amount of speed and fiber to the home [FTTH]."

Towns are adopting the guiding principles, and the coalition has drafted an interlocal agreement to establish a regional utility. As the charter municipalities, Rockport and Camden will have the issue on their June ballots. Hall says "a couple of other major core towns are going to approve it shortly thereafter."

IDENTIFYING BROADBAND GAPS

A first step in broadband planning is determining service gaps in an area. Though Hall and her family were lucky enough to get Rockport's FTTH service, a large majority of town residents were too far from the network.

"I have 1 Gbps because I was fortunate to bring fiber down from a few telephone poles to my house, but not many people have the ability to do that because it's too far to take it," Hall says.

Today, the main broadband provider in Camden and Rockport is Charter Spectrum. Broadband options are even more limited in other parts of the state. "As you get into some of the outer reaches into the mid-portion of the state, some towns are still on DSL or satellite," Hall says.

One common problem Maine and other states face with broadband availability is the FCC mapping reporting system. Even if only one person in a census block can access broadband, the entire area is deemed served.

Maine-based network asset management company VETRO is helping communities

make sense of data they gather about broadband gaps and availability so they can better plan their broadband futures.

DATA-INFORMED PLANNING

VETRO established the VETRO Cares program to accelerate broadband expansion in local communities by providing planning and design tools throughout the U.S. So far, it targets communities mainly in Maine, but it plans to expand the program to other parts of the country over time.

Central to the program is the VETRO FiberMap, a cloud-based mapping platform that provides internet infrastructure intelligence. Data pertaining to mapping, asset inventory, cost estimations and more can be done using the VETRO FiberMap. Moving data to a cloud-based platform provides a virtual table all stakeholders can collaborate around.

The Mid-Coast Broadband Coalition uses the VETRO FiberMap to access and analyze data for towns looking to become part of the coalition. Using the auto-design feature in VETRO's software platform, Hall ran 19 different scenarios to compare a core group of towns. "VETRO gives me a good sense of payback years, costs and potential revenue," she says. "It has been so helpful."

"We decided to take the platform that we were delivering to traditional ISPs and put it in the hands of the community groups that were trying to do broadband planning," says Brian Mefford, VETRO vice president of broadband strategy. "We came up with this idea to invite interested parties to apply for a slot in a cohort."

The first VETRO Cares cohort of eight groups convened earlier this year. In April, VETRO unveiled a second cohort. The local broadband initiatives included in the second cohort are the Town of Rome, the Town of Northport, Greater East Grand Region Broadband, Mount Desert, the Southwest Waldo County Broadband Coalition, the Mid-Coast Broadband Coalition, and the Town of Sebago.

Communities that participate in VETRO Cares receive a six-month subscription to VETRO FiberMap,

VETRO gives communities free access to its technology and mapping tools, along with technical support and data, so they can more effectively plan for community broadband.

training and ongoing user support, and broadband planning and design capabilities with access to mission-critical state and federal data sets. Representatives from each cohort meet monthly to discuss their progress, challenges and lessons.

"The idea is to give these communities free access to our technology and mapping tools along with technical support and data to have a home base to do their community broadband planning," Mefford says.

MEETING DIVERSE NEEDS

Every community is at a different stage of broadband development. At one end, some communities need to identify what issues they have with broadband availability.

"Some are very early stage and just know they have a problem with connectivity," Mefford says. "They want to get a picture and a map of where and what that gap really is."

Others, such as Rockport, that already have a fiber network in place, now use the VETRO FiberMap platform to understand how they can further build out what they have into other communities.

Overall, VETRO Cares allows what are typically volunteer groups to compile data – conduct surveys, speed tests and everything relevant to a community or a group of communities.

"It's rewarding to see connections made among the towns participating in the VETRO Cares program," Mefford says. "We have had group sessions where people make introductions and make connections, and where you see peer learning, sharing of stories and best practices develop."

NEW FUNDING OPTIONS

Funding is a core issue community groups contend with in planning for

broadband. Maine recently passed a \$15 million bond to fund more infrastructure via the Connect Maine Authority, a government entity charged with facilitating the universal availability of broadband to all Maine households and businesses. Part of its role is to administer grants. The Connect Maine Authority is taking applications for grants and will issue the second half of the money later this year.

When that happens, "VETRO Cares cohort towns and groups will be in a good position," Mefford says. "They will have designs and areas that they have identified as eligible and underserved with buildout plans, which makes the plans shovel-ready."

Soon, Maine will receive about \$130 million in pandemic relief funds. Maine Sen. Angus King led the charge to establish a \$10 billion fund that could be directed to state broadband offices, which in turn could direct money to local projects.

"This decentralization and moving away from FCC reverse auctions and going to state broadband offices will keep money closer to the ground level," Mefford says.

The region that includes towns and cities that can access only DSL and satellite is deemed by the FCC definition to be underserved and unserved. Although Rockport and Camden won't qualify for FCC funding, they do qualify for money earmarked for broadband infrastructure in the American Rescue Plan Act and block grants. Rockport is eligible to get \$350,000, and Knox County, which includes several towns in the Mid-Coast Broadband Coalition, gets \$7.71 million.

Hall says the coalition is urging the towns "to contribute a large portion, if not all, those funds for broadband."

One element that could alter the rollout of funds is the definition of

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broadband. Today, the FCC defines broadband as being a location that can get 25/3 Mbps.

“There’s a high likelihood the definition of eligibility will change,” Mefford says. “I don’t expect Connect Maine Authority offices to stick with the 25/3 Mbps definition of broadband when they are putting this money to use. If it goes up to 100 Mbps symmetrical, it’s likely that Rockport and the whole state would become eligible.”

NAVIGATING MAKE READY

Rockport and Camden are moving forward with their broadband plans, but the towns are not at the stage of going through the make-ready process with local utilities to get access to existing poles. However, they are collaborating with ISPs willing to provide open access and enable competition and will be able to lean on the ISPs to handle the make-ready process.

“Historically, only a few ISPs are willing to compete on an open-access network,” Hall says. “Those ISPs have a lot of history and experience dealing with the make-ready costs and issues.”

When Camden and Rockport get further along in their planning process, which includes getting pole information and uploading it, the VETRO FiberMap will continue to be a useful tool for the two towns.

BROADBAND UTILITY DISTRICTS

As part of VETRO’s second cohort, groups of two to 10 towns are collaborating to create what are known as broadband utility districts, including the Downeast Broadband Utility in Maine. Owned by the towns of Calais, Baileyville and Alexander, Downeast is the first and only municipal internet broadband utility in the state. Designed as an open-access network, it has built the internet infrastructure allowing

multiple internet service providers to offer internet, television and telephone services to residents of the three towns.

In addition to identifying broadband gaps, the VETRO FiberMap platform is a solution a utility district can use to manage fiber assets when it builds out a network. Communities that intend to hand off the building and operation of the fiber network to a third party also can use it.

“Broadband utility districts are a relatively new construct,” Mefford says. “I don’t know how many other broadband utility districts are in formation, but the goal of some VETRO Cares cohort members is to end up with an FTTH network and an operating ownership entity in the form of one of these utility districts.” ❖

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