BERRIEN COUNTY BROADBAND INTERNET TASK FORCE

❧ BCBIT ❧

June 2, 2022

12:30 PM via Zoom+
Berrien County Administration Center

MEETING NOTES

Zoom Attendees: Berrien County Commissioner **Teri Freehling**; Berrien County Commissioner **Jim Curran**; Berrien County Commissioner **Ezra Scott**; Berrien County Administrator **Brain Dissette**; Berrien County Corporate Counsel **Thaddeus Hackworth**; Berrien County Community Development Director **Dan Fette**; Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC) Executive Director **John Egelhaaf**; DCS Technology Design Director of Network Engineering **Chris Scharrer**. **Zoom Guest Attendees:** James Pelletier, Weesaw Township.

I. **COMMUNITIES RECEIVING SWMPC ASSISTANCE.** Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC) Executive Director John Egelhaaf updated the group on communities receiving assistance from SWMPC for broadband planning utilizing the SWMPC's purchased GEO Software Mapping Software Technology and the services of SWMPC-BCBIT grant writer. Overall, there has been no movement from the previous list of municipality broadband engagement from SWMPC presented at our May 19[1] BCBIT Meeting[1]. Today, SWMPC is meeting with Sodus Township.

II. **DCS BRIEFING/STATUS UPDATE.** Chris Scharrer, from DCS TECHNOLOGY DESIGN, LLC (DCS) gave the group a briefing and status update of the Countywide broadband infrastructure inventory and mapping project. DCS was approved by the BERRIEN COUNTY BOARD of COMMISSIONERS (BOC), through RESOLUTION F2204255, to provide an accurate snapshot of what internet technologies exist in Berrien County, down to the parcel level, or address level, whichever exists as the whole. DCS begins this project through a physical survey of practically every road mile, through a boots-on-the-ground approach, mapping available internet technologies. DCS will identify and plot these technologies on a map. Once compiled, this report will show a precise inventory of internet infrastructure available to homeowners and businesses. The final format will be an informative report, with mapping of the entire County in Geographical Information Systems (GIS) showing where broadband internet infrastructure exists, and where we have gaps that need to be filled.

To date, the DCS Team has completed WATERVLIET CHARTER TOWNSHIP and BAINBRIDGE TOWNSHIP, driven 3-4 other townships extensively in the north part of the County, and plans to get a start on surveying HAGAR TOWNSHIP today. Data collection teams take 12-weeks to document existing internet infrastructure through a visual inventory.
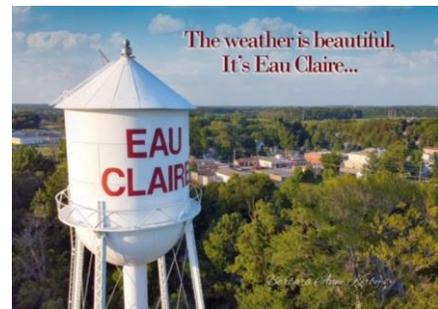
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[1] Reference: BCBIT May 19, 2022 Meeting Notes: BCBIT_05.19.2022

Once compiled, this visual inventory along with all the other information and resources documenting funding and infrastructure deployment allows for comprehensible view of what we have (and what we don't have), and where there are gaps of unserved and underserved reside.

Much to the surprise of DCS, as it relates to Bainbridge Township, MICHIANA SUPERNET, the broadband company DCS stumbled upon during a validation test, has a much bigger presence then DCS initially realized. For clarification purposes, Michiana Supernet is not the same, or to be confused with SISTER LAKES CABLE, another company laying fiber in Cass County, with headquarters also in Cass County. Michiana Supernet[2], with the corporate name Supernet Communication LLC, is headquartered in Watervliet, the Cass County side (east of M-140). Per a statement from Chris Scharrer, DCS, "Michiana Supernet has fiber? And a lot of it!" Further research shows Michigan Supernet has a fiber line running to South Bend, and one to Grand Rapids, with a data center in Dowagiac.

Additionally, Chris Scharrer from DCS Technology Design (DCS) stated he was recently in the VILLAGE of EAU CLAIRE prepping for his team's field survey (in this area). As he rounded the corner on Pipestone Road, traveling east, heading into the village, just as the speed limit drops from 50 MPH to 25 MPH, he saw utility flags everywhere (for a broadband infrastructure network engineer conducting a field study of available internet infrastructure, this is like Christmas morning). Based on quick-thinking and field-survey experience, DCS did a reconnaissance at the local country hardware store, the Eau Claire Fruit Exchange, and confirmed their hunch: MIDWEST ENERGY & COMMUNICATIONS (MEC) is indeed laying fiber. Further research confirmed MEC is utilizing the RURAL DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY FUND (RDOF)[3] awarded to them to complete this fiber infrastructure build. This fiber network will be lit-up by the end of summer.

Commission Freehling stated the Village of Eau Claire, sometime ago, reached out to her regarding broadband deployment. The Village of Eau Claire received a quote for broadband: 3-miles for $300,000 ($100,000 per mile). Most likely this quote is from Midwest Energy & Communications (MEC). To add (possible broadband deployment) complexity, the Village of Eau Claire two municipal

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[2] Michiana Supernet, with the corporate name Supernet Communications LLC, is described on their web-site as Southwest Michigan's Rural Internet Service Provider. This company is not a satellite or cellular hot spot service company. Listed on their web-site are several rural locations and townships covering Cass, Berrien, and Van Buren Counties. www.supernetcc.weebly.com

[3] The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, RDOF, initiated in August 2019, is a FEDERAL COMMUNICATION COMMISSION (FCC) backed initiative to provide broadband internet speed to the unserved, underserved, and partially serviced homes and business across the country. RDOF aims to accomplish this mission by funding the expansion of rural broadband access with $20.4 billion over ten years, distributed in two phased through an FCC-managed reverse auction (AUCTION 904). The FCC structured the auction, as a reverse auction, to be technologically neutral and to prioritize bids for high-speed low latency offering. In rural areas, there are many challenges to overcome in finding the best route for buildout from the backhaul and interconnects. A reverse auction encourages the best route, best coverage, at the best price.

boundaries distinctively set by their Main Street Corridor. The Village of Eau Claire lies partially within PIPESTONE TOWNSHIP, properties north of Main Street, and partially within BERRIEN TOWNSHIP, those properties south of Main Street within the village proper (weird-right?).

John Egelhaaf, SWMPC, stated he had met with the Village of Eau Claire also some time ago. They are open to collaboration with surrounding municipalities, in this case could be Pipestone Township (see MEC_PIPESTONE_TWP_RDOF_MAP), Berrien Township, collaboration with both Townships, or another option to consider could be collaboration with an Internet Service Provider (ISP) building in CASS COUNTY, which is due east heading out of the village. We'll know better once the DCS Report is complete.

With this in mind, and revisiting the initial ISP quote to build 3-miles of high-speed fiber at $300,000 in the Village of Eau Claire, this is a prime example of not knowing what you don't know. Not knowing what you don't know could result in broadband overbuild in an underbuilt market. "Overbuild" (in broadband deployment) is a term being tossed around, ostensibly, as a warning against wasteful government spending. In the real world, "overbuild" in the context of building broadband networks could mean bringing competition to an underbuilt market often monopolized by incumbent providers. Case in point, as Chris stated, once the DCS field study is complete they will be able to tell us precisely where broadband infrastructure is located (or not located), or, in this case, being installed.

As it relates to the quote received by the Village of Eau Claire, this may be to fill what RDOF does not cover. He also added, open communication in this type of forum is crucial and important to the process. Using today as example, we discovered there may be a duplication of efforts (specific to the Village of Eau Claire, and possibly other areas). Not knowing for sure, we have DCS on-board to validate internet infrastructure serviceable or plans for build out. Also today, we discussed Michiana Supernet as a definite resource possibility to connect rural areas in the County where it makes sense.

III.   **BARODA TOWNSHIP GRANT APPLICATION.** The group discussed the AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT (ARPA) BERRIEN COUNTY BROADBAND PROPOSALS GRANT APPLICATION received from BARODA TOWNSHIP for broadband funding using designated Berrien County ARPA funds for broadband deployment as a sub-grantee[4]. This document was not submitted for group review, as it was not complete. John Egelhaaf, SWMPC, will connect with Baroda Township to assist the municipality with submitting the information requested found within the application instructions. We want success for everyone. No sense doing this alone, as we can help each other out. The flow of federal funds for broadband deployment is abundant right now, and is unprecedented for investment ready communities.

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[4] Berrien County Board of Commissioners Resolution B2201191, January 27, 2022. Approve ARPA Fund Broadband Request Application.

IV. **BCBIT NEXT STEPS.** John Egelhaaf, SWMPC, shared with Commissioner Freehling and Administrator Dissette notes from the recent broadband conferences he attended in Houston, Texas and Dearborn, Michigan. Accordingly, the notes he prepared and presented are in the format of a white paper, or *manifesto*, with action items.

Presumably, while DCS Technology is hard at work mapping the broadband infrastructure in Berrien County, this is a good time to regroup and look at this white paper, or manifesto, as a procedural guide to a Countywide solution. Several main topics within this white paper were discussed, mainly centered on investment readiness, or, fundamentally, creating a type of Fiber Master Plan.

Basically, we are at a crucial point and nearing a detailed understanding of Berrien County's broadband needs. At this crossroad, we will need to weigh the many cost/benefit scenarios and decide which path forward is best for the County, organizationally, financially and operationally. A detailed understanding of feasible options to support decision-making evaluation around broadband expansion could best be achieved through tailored strategies built around the uniqueness of additional community stakeholders at the table. This would take on a collaborative approach supporting needs across multiple community anchors, including schools, libraries, healthcare, public safety, higher education, major business, agriculture, municipalities (specifically government service functions enhanced through the internet) and community support organizations. This outreach initiative could become an expansion of the BCBIT core group, or a sub-committee of BCBIT with the potential to identify public-private partnerships (PPPs).

Overall, for broadband expansion in Berrien County, the key issues are accessibility, reliability, affordability, and, once you have these three checked off the list, bandwidth needs are next, which increase exponentially year over year. During this time of refocus, this is the perfect opportunity to rethink a Countywide network and develop a case for a community broadband network utilizing the infrastructure we know exists and building out from this middle-mile connecting the last-mile.

John Egelhaaf, SWMPC, further discussed our need to consider broadening the voices at the table, whether with this group or a sub-committee that includes anchor institutions; make sure our focus is the end-user; and as described, extending our mission and focus to include a smart-grid design for utility use and broadband connection funding. Commissioner Freehling asked John Egelhaaf to share this white paper/manifesto with the rest of the group for discussion at future meetings.

As the discussion continued, the success of Washtenaw County's Broadband Task Force[5] was highlighted with Chris Scharrer from DCS leading this part of the conversation. Following the lead of Washtenaw County, yet embarking on our own journey, to achieve the best outcome possible, identification of the next steps remains essential to our mission.

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[5] https://www.washtenaw.org/2867/Broadband-Task-Force

Per DCS, today, in Washtenaw County, four (4) ISPs provide 100% coverage based on the gap analysis from DCS Technology.   Washtenaw County did not pick one (1) ISP. Instead, through outcome from their RFP process (#8096-WC), it was realized only two (2) out of the four (4) bidders could cover the entire County.

What (eventually) made sense for Washtenaw County was to have the ISPs fill in the areas they know without overbuilding. Chris stated, "The problem with choosing a single ISP is this - I have yet to see a competing ISP building off the competitions available infrastructure. With that in mind, have the ISPs cover the areas they know. Knowing who is where, and what can be filled-in by the existing ISP infrastructure results in a dramatic decrease in your overall budget, plus faster deployment."

By comparison to this statement, the Broadband Bill (for County grants) (SB 970) making its way through State Legislature appears, at this point, may require a County to pick one (1) ISP. A sole source ISP may be a misunderstanding from what is believed to be the original spirit of the bill. It might be too late to change the wording, or clarify the wording to allow for ambiguity. Undoubtedly, though this tweak seems minor to some. However, as the case may be with Berrien County, a grant that requires us to pick one (1) ISP is a short list (one, maybe two…..take a guess). Essentially, this squeezes out the smaller ISPs serving our rural communities (and are local to Michigan), that can serve our smaller communities with the infrastructure they have built, or plan to build.

At this point, whether an RFI process is pursued, followed by an RFP, we are well on the way to broadband success once our measure of success is defined. Let's face it, as we reach out to our local municipalities the bigger the connectivity problem the less likely they are to have excess staffing capacity to actually address doing what needs to be done. This is why we have GEO Mapping Software in place, a grant-writer, and DCS Technology mapping our infrastructure.
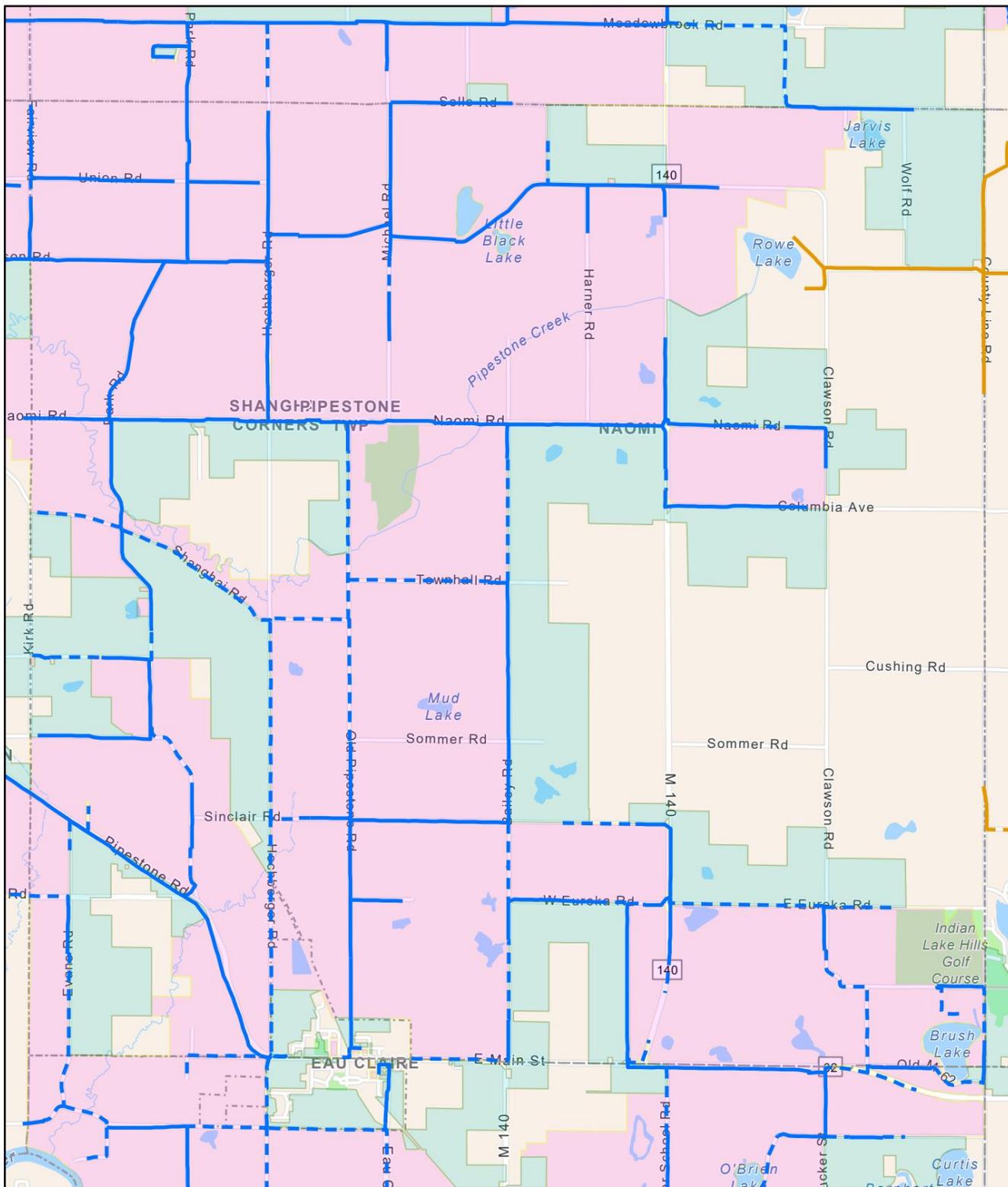
Finally, as part of a Countywide solution, we can agree investment in middle-mile infrastructure facilitates last-mile deployment. We can also agree Berrien County is not 100% covered. As we wait for the DCS project to be completed, knowing what we need to do next needs to be discussed and considered to prevent any lag in progress that is inevitable if a clear strategy with tactics is not devised. If we go to an RFI or RFP process, who puts this together will need to be decided. Using the resources we know we have available should be pulled in to assist (i.e., Merit, Washtenaw County, SWMPC, etc). Most importantly, knowing where the unserved exists in the County will set precedence to broadband deployment. Whether we build a County-owned fiber ring, or fund ISPs to fill in the gaps in their existing service areas is yet to be determined. No sense reinventing the wheel if it's not broke.

V.   **MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT of TREASURY OUTREACH.** John Egelhaaf, SWMPC, discussed his first meeting with the MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT of TREASURY as it relates to the closing of Palisades Power Plant, in Covert Township, Van Buren County. Economic impacts will be felt within Van Buren County and the Tri-County Region of Van Buren, Cass, and Berrien County.

More on this later, as this was the first meeting. He is thinking precision-AG opportunities as a focus to these meetings and the development of a regional recovery strategy as it relates to the closure of the Palisades Nuclear Plant. The goal is to implement a comprehensive economic recovery strategy.

VI.   **DEMONSTRATION/PILOT PROJECT PARTNERSHIP.** John Egelhaaf, SWMPC, reported out he had a meeting with the non-profit group TELEHEALTH EQUITY COALITION (TEC) regarding a pilot project for our region.   TEC, based in Washington, D.C., is a coalition of supporters who advocate for greater access to telehealth, and the adoption of telehealth policy in communities as a way of equitable access to healthcare. This group is building a library of digital tools as resources promoting healthcare and digital innovation in hopes of advancing equitable access to virtual care. This is the first in a series of meetings planned at 3-week intervals. More updates to follow as this was the initial meeting. TEC requires membership into their group, at no charge, to access their resources.

VII.   **MISCELLANEOUS.** Next Meeting June 16, 2022.
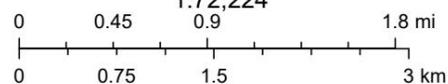
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Fiber Cable

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Auction Zone

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