

Otter Creek Communications Union District

FY2020 Annual Report

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated strains on Vermont's inadequate broadband infrastructure, legislation was passed allowing for municipal select boards to join communications unions districts without a town wide vote. In July, the select boards of the towns of Brandon and Goshen voted to form the Otter Creek Communications Union District and with an organizational meeting on July 31, 2020, the OCCUD was officially formed.

Since that first meeting, much work has been done fulfill our mission "to expand affordable broadband access to the residents of the Otter Creek Communications Union District" A list of highlights below:

- Since CUD formation in July 2020, created board and executive committee and have grown to 11 towns.
- Nearly wrapped up feasibility study.
- Applied for and have been awarded 3 grants: 2 Vermont Community Foundation grants and the CARES Act funding.
- Have coordinate the identification of multiple hotspot needs throughout the Rutland Region and shepherded the award of 11.
- Have met or spoken with the Town Managers or Boards of 13 municipalities.
- Have coordinated the contracts for retention of legal services as well as website development services.
- Have coordinated the proposal and application for funds for the development of an outreach, clearinghouse, and case management tool for the coordinated identification of internet connectivity need and outreach to the public and dissemination of State, Federal, and local resources to support this need.

Some anticipated milestones that will be reached by the end of this calendar year include:

- **The finalization of our independent municipality** – Under the guidance of our legal team, we will have our own EIN, insurance and will no longer need to have the Rutland Regional Planning Commission serve as fiscal agent, making us more financially attractive to banks, grantors and investors.
- **Adoption of a business strategy** - This critical step will be informed by the results of the feasibility study and will give our members a concrete path that we can follow, including a business plan development, which will allow for us to work toward a target buildout of infrastructure and provide broadband service to our members' residents.
- **A full service Otter Creek Communications Union Website AND Marketing Campaign**– Aside from announcing our existence to the county and the ability to provide outreach and information about our "good works", the website will also allow us to connect folks with broadband resources and utilize our custom pre-subscription gateway, which is a critical step in demonstrating need and raising the capital to support a buildout. A countywide mailing campaign and the creation of promotional materials to be distributed to our targeted towns (posters that indicate WiFi hotspots, rack cards for town offices) will aid in these efforts.

Our member towns are being served well by their appointed representatives. The deadlines around the use of CARES Act funding, which has underwritten the above referenced 2020 work, have proven to be a challenge. Identifying the work, qualifying the vendors and executing the contracts has been made possible thanks to the tireless work of our Rutland Regional Planning Commission representative, Amanda O'Connor. The Vermont Community Foundation has provided some essential seed money that will help sustain our efforts in 2021. We are all committed continuing our work in an expeditious, yet prudent and fiscally responsible, manner to connect our underserved residents with the broadband access they deserve.

Respectfully Submitted,
Bill Moore, Chair