



NEIGHBORHOOD & LONG TERM PLANNING, PUBLIC FACILITIES, ARTS & CELEBRATION COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE MEETING

~ MINUTES ~

Wednesday, June 12, 2024

2:00 PM

Sullivan Chamber
795 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139

The Neighborhood and Long Term Planning, Public Utilities, Arts and Celebrations Committee will hold a public hearing to discuss municipal broadband.

Attendee Name	Present	Absent	Late	Arrived
Burhan Azeem	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Patricia Nolan	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Joan Pickett	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sumbul Siddiqui	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3:38 PM
Jivan Sobrinho-Wheeler	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

A public meeting of the Cambridge City Council’s Neighborhood & Long-Term Planning, Public Facilities, Arts & Celebration Committee was held on Wednesday, June 12, 2024. The meeting was Called to Order at 2:00 p.m. by the Co-Chair, Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler. Pursuant to Chapter 20 of the Acts of 2022 adopted by Massachusetts General Assembly and approved by the Governor, this public meeting was hybrid, allowing participation in person, in the Sullivan Chamber, 2nd Floor, City Hall, 795 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA and by remote participation via Zoom.

At the request of the Co-Chair, Deputy City Clerk Crane called the roll.

- Councillor Azeem – Present/Remote
- Councillor Nolan – Present/Remote
- Councillor Pickett – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
- Councillor Siddiqui – Absent*
- Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Present/In Sullivan Chamber

Present – 4, Absent – 1. Quorum established.

***Councillor Siddiqui was present and in the Sullivan Chamber at 3:38p.m.**

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler offered opening remarks and noted that the Call of the meeting was to discuss municipal broadband. Present at the meeting was City Manager Yi-An Huang, Assistant City Manager of Finance, Claire Spinner, Chief Information Officer, Patrick McCormick, and Director of Communications and Community Relations, Lee Gianetti. Also present via Zoom were Councillors Toner and Wilson, and Mayor Simmons was present in the Chamber.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Patrick McCormick who gave a presentation titled “Municipal Broadband”, which was provided in advance of the meeting and included in the Agenda Packet. City Manager Huang and City Staff were available to respond to questions and comments that came forward from Councillors throughout the presentation. The presentation offered an overview of the Municipal Broadband Study, broadband investment, municipal broadband goals and benefits, distinguishing between digital equity and municipal broadband, and a review of the Cambridge Housing Authority FTTP Broadband project. Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Dana Foley from Loveland, Colorado who was joined by Loveland former City Councillor John Fogle, and Briana Reed-Harmel, Municipal Fiber Manager. Dana Foley and his team provided a brief overview on how they were able to implement an internet service to their residents and where they currently are as far as an internet provider.

Co-Chair Sobrino-Wheeler recognized Roy Russell from Upgrade Cambridge, a nonprofit organization which is dedicated to addressing digital equity and moving Cambridge forward on municipal broadband. Roy Russell provided comments that were in strong support of Cambridge moving towards municipal broadband and encouraged the City to invest in a service that would benefit the City and the community while also providing digital equity.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Co-Chair Pickett who asked for more information on the background of municipal broadband in Loveland and what decision or experience made them move in that direction. John Fogle responded by sharing the challenges that Loveland was facing with having internet access in their schools and how Comcast was unable to provide a service to help them, which started the process of looking into municipal broadband. Co-Chair Pickett had questions regarding the costs and operating systems, which Briana Reed-Harmel was able to provide information on, noting that they fully used revenue bonds.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Azeem who shared that he was excited about the conversation and asked Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler how he was looking to move forward after this meeting. Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler shared that after conversations in the Finance Committee meetings, he saw this as an chance to discuss the challenges and opportunities that municipal broadband could bring, and what the next decision steps are to moving towards implementation. Councillor Azeem shared that he had the same question for City staff. City Manager Huang responded by sharing that there is a good understanding of what pursuing municipal broadband would look like. The City Manager noted that the City is looking at a very detailed financial model, noting that the City would need to provide around \$150 million capital subsidy up front. City Manager Huang shared it is important for the City and City Councillors to talk through what the priorities are of the City, and where municipal broadband falls on that list. Councillor Azeem had a follow-up question regarding capital projects and timelines. Councillor Nolan, Co-Chair of the Finance Committee, provided a response, sharing those conversations will happen in the Fall. Councillor Azeem provided comments and suggestions on how to move forward with broadband to be ready to discuss further in the fall. Councillor Azeem had clarifying questions on certain technology and gigabit numbers, which Patrick McCormick was available to respond to.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Nolan who offered comments of support with moving towards a plan for municipal broadband. Councillor Nolan asked the team from the City if they had spoken with small businesses to understand what their needs are. Dana Foley responded and shared their experience working with small businesses in Loveland and also provided feedback as a small business owner himself. John Fogle provided additional comments regarding small businesses and their experience working with internet providers and municipal broadband, and how the internet plays a large role in small businesses being successful. Patrick McCormick responded and shared the outreach that has been done in Cambridge so far and shared some of the feedback and data that was provided from the survey. Councillor Nolan had questions on construction and how that would look if municipal broadband were implemented. Patrick McCormick and City Manager Huang provided an overview of what construction may look like and shared that it is detailed in the report, noting that a fair amount of roadwork would need to happen. Councillor Nolan shared that she looks forward to discussing municipal broadband further.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Toner who asked how many subscribers the City would need to have in order for municipal broadband to be sustainable. Patrick McCormick shared that the study is based on a 40% take rate. Councillor Toner asked for clarification on the cost of services for customers who may switch to municipal services. Patrick McCormick provided a brief review of what the costs could be. Councillor Toner stressed the importance of factoring in construction if this is implemented as well as having a recommendation from the City Manager on if the City should move forward with this. Councillor Toner pointed out that municipal broadband has been in discussion for some time now and it is important to decide soon on whether an investment like this is a priority. Dana Foley provided feedback on the services that citizens in Loveland receive, the type of packages that are provided, and the decrease in costs for subscribers. Councillor Toner shared concerns about making a capital investment into municipal broadband. City Manager Huang provided additional comments on how the City would move forward with municipal broadband financially and shared data from the study.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler asked the team from Loveland if they had any information on the reasoning behind why people in their community are switching to municipal broadband services. Briana Reed-Harmel responded

and shared that it really depends on the customer and that there are many factors that contribute to the switch. Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler asked City staff if market funding is something that has been looked at if this were to move forward. Patrick McCormick responded and shared that the City has spoken with many firms building out networks across the country and that more research can be done if this were to continue to move forward. Roy Russell provided additional comments on different business models and suggestions for next steps. Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler asked the City if there have been conversations about bringing other service providers to Cambridge besides Comcast, or if municipal broadband is the only option. Patrick McCormick responded and shared the challenges with certain infrastructure and market environments. City Manager Huang responded as well on what different paths could look like.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Siddiqui who asked a clarifying question on the infrastructure and services that are used by Harvard and MIT. Patrick McCormick explained how larger companies use certain providers in addition to having their own private fiber networks between buildings. City Manager Huang offered comments on the challenges on how services and infrastructures have become competitive and privately owned, which has brought the City to think more about a municipal broadband option. Councillor Siddiqui shared what next steps could look like and involving the community to get feedback.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler stressed the importance of digital equity and looking at cost, service, and reliability if this goes forward. In addition, Co-Chair Pickett shared that it may be beneficial to look at digital divide issues.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Wilson who shared that she appreciates the conversations and looks forward to how the City continues to have this discussion while looking at goals and financial decisions.

Co-Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Co-Chair Pickett who made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Deputy City Clerk Crane called the roll.

Councillor Azeem – Absent

Councillor Nolan – Yes

Councillor Pickett – Yes

Councillor Siddiqui – Yes

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Yes

Yes – 4, No – 0, Absent – 1. Motion passed.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 4:00p.m.

Attachment A – Written communications received from the public.

Clerk’s Note: The City of Cambridge/22 City View records every City Council meeting and every City Council Committee meeting. This is a permanent record. The video for this meeting can be viewed at:

https://cambridgema.granicus.com/player/clip/773?view_id=1&redirect=true

A communication was received from Patrick McCormick, Chief Information Officer, transmitting a presentation regarding Municipal Broadband.

A communication was received from Patrick McCormick, Chief Information Officer, transmitting the December 2023 Municipal Broadband and Digital Equity Update.

A communication was received from Patrick McCormick, Chief Information Officer, transmitting a presentation from March 2023 from a City Council Roundtable meeting on Municipal Broadband feasibility.

A communication was received from Patrick McCormick, Chief Information Officer, transmitting March 2023 Broadband Study.

6/12/2024

Erwin, Nicole

From: Roy Russell <mrroygbiv@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, June 12, 2024 4:28 PM
To: City Clerk
Subject: my comments for NLTP committee meeting earlier today
Attachments: Upgrade Comments for NLTP meeting re_ Municipal Broadband June 12, 2024 (1).pdf

Attached are my comments that I made at the NLTP committee meeting today June 12 at 2PM.

Best regards,

Roy Russell
Upgrade Cambridge

Chairs Pickett and Sobrinho-Wheeler, Members of the the Neighborhood & Long Term Planning, Public Facilities, Arts & Celebration Committee:

I'm Roy Russell from Upgrade Cambridge. Upgrade Cambridge is a grassroots 501(c)(3) organization which is dedicated to addressing digital equity and moving Cambridge forward on Muncipal Broadband.

While much has changed in the world since we began our advocacy in 2018, what brings us here today has not. Cambridge continues to be a City in which Comcast is a monopoly broadband provider. It remains justifiably reviled by its customers - your constituents. And the City can fix this, if it so chooses, while also investing in a framework to foster digital equity.

I encourage all the councillors to read the CTC study which was published in March of last year. CTC, generally recognized as leaders in their field, did an excellent job with their analysis of the costs, their presentation of potential public private partnerships and business plans for the city, and conducted a statistically significant survey that showed overwhelming public support for Municipal Broadband even if it required raising taxes. I think it was Vice Mayor McGovern who called the level of public support nothing short of a mandate.

If you already read the report, I encourage you to go back and read it again. Chapter 8 presents an 18-24 month timeline and roadmap for the next steps with several decision points along the way. We have seen very little progress on this roadmap. We encourage the city to begin this work as soon as possible. As the report says, "this process would also provide critical data on the potential magnitude of a City contribution."

Yes, a significant City investment is necessary. As the report explains, installing a new fiber optic network in the city is expensive enough that it is not a profitable undertaking for a private company alone. But that presents a perfect opportunity for the city with its experience financing and building infrastructure and its much lower borrowing costs. City ownership of a municipal fiber network will, as the report says, "allow the City to incorporate key public policy goals into contracts with private partners."

Municipal broadband will bring competition to the market dominated for the past 4 decades by monopoly provider Comcast with all the benefits that competition brings - better service, lower prices, better customer service, etc. For those who choose to remain with Comcast, this benefit alone could justify a large city investment. And there is nothing else the city could do that will get Comcast to behave better as they operate as a monopoly regulated (or really unregulated) at the federal level.

Municipal Broadband also enables the city to address public policy goals such as providing a reliable, fast, and discounted service for those who need it most, addressing the access portion of digital equity. If the city were to follow the open network business model (model 3 in the CTC study) then we would see even further benefits of competition with multiple ISPs providing services, including Comcast if they so choose to use the new network. We would see more and better services, better customer service, and innovation. Cambridge deserves this, as the city where the internet was invented and developed, we remain stuck in the last century.

As far as cost estimates go, is the Municipal Broadband project well scoped and understood? Perhaps compared to other potential capital projects in the city, however there remain many unanswered questions and the process to resolve those is well described in Chapter 8.

This is not another project that will have surprise cost overruns. The cost estimates made by CTC are conservative, factoring in inflation and a generous 30% contingency. The assumptions made regarding take rates and revenue are consistent with similar projects in other cities with a single incumbent monopoly provider.

As we go down this path, you may hear horror stories of Municipal Broadband projects gone bad as the incumbent provider spins up their Fear Uncertainty and Doubt generator. While there have been a few of these, the vast majority are highly successful. The few that have had problems are usually either from an underestimate of the costs with the ensuing cost overruns or an overly optimistic expectation of revenue with the ensuing shortfalls. The CTC study carefully considered both of these and their assumptions for both cost and revenue are conservative and realistic.

The city has described the cost of building the network as “\$149 - \$194” million dollars. While this is a technically correct description, it deserves some explanation. As I mentioned, these numbers are inflation adjusted and contain a 30% contingency. If the city were to build and operate the system itself (Business model 1 in the CTC study) then the investment might be as much as the high end estimate of \$194 million. However that system would also generate over \$15 million a year in revenue for the city. While we are not advocating for this business model, a back of the envelope calculation shows that with Cambridge’s borrowing costs of 3%, a \$15 million revenue stream pays off \$230 million in debt in 20 years. A real analysis is not that simple or optimistic, but that’s why the steps outlined by CTC are vital to providing the City and the Council the groundwork needed to make a decision.

These are the open discussions that the city needs to have:

- A discussion of the various tradeoffs presented in the CTC study.
- A discussion of the value that Municipal Broadband will bring to the city.
- Private discussions between the city and potential partners to validate the business models and to see which partners will consider participating, followed by a discussion of the findings with the public.

Without City action, nothing about Cambridge’s broadband environment will change. Without City action we will continue with the Comcast monopoly, its consumer-unfriendly business practices, last century technology, and its focus on maximizing shareholder value. However if you agree with your constituents, that Cambridge should and must do better, then start down the careful path laid out by CTC. It’s a path to a better future, a future that all of Cambridge deserves.

Erwin, Nicole

From: Aaron Oppenheimer <aaron@aoppenheimer.com>
Sent: Wednesday, June 12, 2024 1:19 PM
To: City Council
Cc: City Clerk; Huang, Yi-An
Subject: In support of municipal broadband

Hello,

I'm writing to support efforts to look into municipal broadband for the City of Cambridge. It's an issue of equity, it's an issue about monopolies, and it's a recognition that the internet is, at this point, a public utility. I fully support a feasibility study and other work to determine what it would take.

thanks
Aaron Oppenheimer
160 Pleasant St.

Erwin, Nicole

From: Alexandra Amati <aamati.sf@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, June 12, 2024 11:18 AM
To: City Council
Cc: City Clerk; Huang, Yi-An; lee@leefarris.net
Subject: Municipal broadband

Hello,

I write in wholehearted and strong support of municipal broadband for Cambridge households.

Thank you
Alexandra Amati
63 Alpine Street, Cambridge

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Alexandra Amati
aamati.sf@gmail.com

Erwin, Nicole

From: A Robbart <arobbart@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, June 12, 2024 11:18 AM
To: City Council; City Clerk; City Manager

To the Council, City Manager:

I strongly support municipal broadband in Cambridge. We should have had city internet access years ago.

Thank you,
Ann Robbart
Alpine St.

Erwin, Nicole

From: Judy Perlman <judy.m.perlman@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, June 12, 2024 11:15 AM
To: City Council
Cc: City Clerk; Huang, Yi-An; lee@leefarris.net
Subject: Writing to support municipal Broadband implementation

Please note my support for a process to implement municipal broadband that will be accessible and affordable to all Crambridge residents.

Thank you.

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Judy Perlman
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