Monthly Report
Tompkins County Council of Governments
for June 14, 2023

by Councilperson Robert Lynch
Enfield TCCOG Representative

The Tompkins County Council of Governments (TCCOG) met on May 25, 2023. We convened in-person in Tompkins County Legislative Chambers so as to adopt minor revisions to the TCCOG bylaws; general housekeeping measures. The changes formalize the opportunity to give member representatives the option to participate virtually, a practice that began during the COVID-19 pandemic. The revisions also establish Tompkins County Government as an official TCCOG member.

The May meeting was long, its length extended by two important presentations; one relating to a Tompkins County Broadband study; the other updating members on progress toward establishing a County-run emergency medical response system. I will summarize these reports below:

Broadband: Joe Starks, President of ECC Technologies, the Penfield, NY-based firm retained by Tompkins County Government to study expanding broadband Internet service, updated TCCOG on progress to date. ECC provided TCCOG members a 97-page report to accompany its presentation. Much of that report detailed an exhaustive, road-by-road survey of where broadband is and where it isn't. "We have put people in vehicles that have driven every road in Tompkins County," Starks claimed. Some may recall that several local towns did the same thing a couple of years ago.

Starks' summary to TCCOG ran 25 minutes, but member questions consumed nearly a full hour thereafter. And member sentiment indicated that the option Tompkins County Government most likely will pursue is the one many on TCCOG least like. Invited by a legislative committee to recommend a preferred option, TCCOG declined to act, a strong signal of some members' dissatisfaction.

Key statistics: The ECC study found that 17% of residents in Tompkins County lack broadband service, a number higher than the statewide average. 28% said they couldn't purchase the Internet speed they wanted; another 13% weren't sure if they could. 96% per cent said they regarded broadband as an "essential service." 85% said they thought it's important to have a choice among providers.

Remember that last statistic. It fueled much of TCCOG's discussion that day. Starks outlined four possible options for Tompkins County to proceed toward connecting the 1,216 addresses its study identified as currently unserved. ECC projects it would take 116 miles of cable infrastructure to reach those places. The two, least-expensive options would cost an estimated $7 Million. They would entail the County either negotiating or putting out to bid contracts with private "partners" (like Haefele or Charter-Spectrum) to extend existing lines to those addresses. ECC has talked about chopping the county into as many as nine geographic zones and negotiating a different contract for each zone.

A more expensive, $14 Million option would provide a so-called "Open Access" model whereby the County would provide "middle mile" infrastructure, and private partners would build off of that. The most expensive choice, estimated to cost $21 Million, would establish a public-private partnership. Under that arrangement, the County would run all of the cables to the unserved addresses, and a private provider would operate the network and service customers.

But as questioning began, those TCCOG members most involved in the discussion signaled a distinct preference for that most expensive option, even though the County Legislature stands unlikely to endorse it. Moreover, some would prefer yet a fifth option, one that Joe Starks' PowerPoint didn't even include. It would set up a governmentally-built municipal broadband service, one potentially available to every resident, not just the currently unserved. Starks pegged the cost of the municipal broadband option at $80-90 Million. Supporting members' rationale was straightforward. Municipal broadband would compete head-to-head with firms like the often-despised Charter-Spectrum.

"We have to decide as a community what are we trying to address," Starks told TCCOG. "Are we trying to address competition, or are we trying to get 100 per cent coverage for all in the county?" Starks signaled that members of the Legislature prefer to address only the latter question; 100 per cent coverage.

"The answer you get depends on the question you ask," Danby Supervisor Joel Gagnon responded. "It looks like the County has essentially chosen to ask what's the most expeditious way to extend services to those that currently do not have it," Gagnon said. "But the bigger question of what's the best way to provide service to the county's residents is not really addressed by the options that are highlighted as being most likely, easiest to pursue," he maintained.

The Town of Dryden is currently building municipal broadband on its own. Caroline is seeking to piggy-back on Dryden's initiative.

"I can't separate the two issues identified," Caroline Supervisor Mark Witmer told TCCOG. "I think they're connected and they have to be connected; providing access and working, long-haul affordability…. I don't think those can be segregated in the conversation or the decision making."

Dryden Councilperson Dan Lamb touted Dryden's $49 per month broadband pricing for 400 megabits per second of service. Starks was skeptical.

"Not having seen your financials, I don't know if that's a valid business model," Starks cautioned Lamb. Nonetheless, "$49 a month; that's a great number. I'll sign up for it myself," Starks said.

"Well, I hope you do," Lamb answered, defending his Town's business plan. "We didn't pick it out of the blue. We've done several modeling exercises…. I don't think it's an outrageous speculation."

Dryden Supervisor Jason Leifer clearly targeted Spectrum as the reason Dryden has strung cable of its own to compete with its commercial competitor.

"We gave up negotiating with Spectrum," Leifer told TCCOG. "They're not interested in universal service. They're not interested in containing cost. What they want is free money like they always do, and they want profit off of it."

Time-conscious TCCOG leadership cut short the broadband discussion before I could ask the question no one else thought of asking. Here it is: Whether it's $7 Million, $21 Million, or even $80 Million, who among us is expected to pay for it; County Government (unlikely, I'd suspect); participating municipalities, grant funding, outside commercial interests, or a combination of the afore-mentioned?

Preparing this report, I posed that exact question June 8th to Nick Helmholdt, the County Planning Department's point person on broadband. Helmholdt's reply:

> "I'd say that all of the funding sources you mentioned could be called on to play a role in expanding broadband to unserved addresses in the County. The exact dollar figures and sources will not be known until the County selects an option to pursue. Once we have that decision, we will then be able to obtain proposals from Internet Service Providers and determine how much grant funding we could anticipate receiving based on how competitive our approach might be."

County Government, quite likely, will pursue one of ECC Technologies' less-expensive options; addressing universal service first; competition later, if ever. But some on TCCOG would definitely like government to reach beyond its immediate short-range objectives.

Emergency Medical Response: Michel Stitley, Tompkins County Director of Emergency Response, and Joe Millman, recently hired as the county's EMS Manager, briefed TCCOG on their efforts to establish an emergency medical service that would supplement the work of local rescue squads, including Enfield's.

Evolving plans call for staffing three "strategically-placed rescue units" around the county, each "an SUV-style vehicle staffed with an EMT," Stitley told TCCOG, "that could help, really supplement the community-based services, by our fire departments in their rescue programs."

The units would not be ambulances. They'd be dispatched ahead of an ambulance, some of which take up to 25 minutes to reach a rural emergency.

"What we envision is really a simultaneous dispatch," Stitley said. Both the County unit and the fire company would be sent at the same time. His advice to fire companies would be, "If the rescue unit's in service, let the 911 Center know so that we can move the assets to areas that have the greatest need." On the other hand, if the County's unit is first on the scene, and the EMT determines an ambulance is not needed, it would notify 911, and the ambulance could stand down.

The TCCOG discussion made clear that the Rapid Medical Response system is still very much a work in progress. At least initially, it would not bill patients for its services.

But neither would the service provide 24/7 coverage. In response to my question, Stitley acknowledged current plans call for all three units to be available simultaneously on 12-hour shifts, weekdays only. One likely schedule would be 7 AM to 7 PM, Monday-Friday. Exact schedules could change based on further research. On evenings and weekends, the local rescue squads would still need to provide response.

Respectfully submitted,

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