



Left to right: Joel Gunnlaugsson, Robert Bjarnarson, Steve Fisco, Hoyt Purinton, Orion Mann, Mick O'Malley, Governor Tony Evers, Robert Cornell, Hans Lux, Ellen LeClaire, Erick Schrier, Nathan Drager, Jim Jorgenson, Mike Gillespie, Lee Engstrom. (Photo courtesy of office of Tony Evers)

I THOUGHT I WAS WRONG ONCE. IT TURNS OUT I WAS MISTAKEN!

When writing and submitting the grant for the Public Service Commission's very small 2023 Broadband Round, as I have mentioned in several previous editions of these pages, I did not think we stood a snowball's chance in H E double toothpicks. "Pie in the sky," I told you on more than one occasion. These grants are not a "check the box and sign your name" process. However, I figured that the significant time and effort involved in compiling the information, writing the grant, and submitting it on the PSC's website (probably in the neighborhood of 100 hours) was not a waste of time because the grant would already be written and only need minor massaging for the next opportunity. And, of course, the answer is always no if you never ask.

As it turns out, there might actually be some ice in hell. As you have no doubt already heard by this time (the announcement was made on May 18), our grant submittal was chosen as one of the winners. In fact, we were ranked #6 of the 24 chosen (74 total in the final count) and were awarded the largest amount, \$2,500,000. Believe us when we say we were a bit more than pleasantly surprised. An additional reason that we had zero expectation of winning this award is because we were asking for 18% of the total funding available. This and the match should enable us to complete the fiber project for the entire Island (or get us close enough that we won't need to consider another grant application).

This coincided with Governor Evers' visit to the cooperative on the same day. We had an inkling that this was going to happen when we saw the broadband grant program on the

agenda of the Public Service Commission's open meeting which was published the week before (the day after the governor's office called to arrange the visit).

Of course, there could be nothing official until the commissioners voted on the staff recommendation, and the recommendation was not publicly available until about an

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hour before the meeting, so all we had was a guess that we were relatively high in the running. After all, why would the governor visit us to see our project on the day that the PSC denied our grant application? This was a good opportunity for him to tout his budget proposal to add \$750 million to the program as part of the biennial budget, which, if the match scoring remains the same (skin in

the game) should end up being \$1.5 billion infused into rural broadband. Unfortunately, this proposal did not make it into the biennial budget and while we are very much fans of frugal spending, it means that it is likely that other areas, not as lucky as us, will have a significant slowdown in progress.

The way the grant programs work at the Public Service Commission is that once the proposals are submitted, comments/objections and rebuttals to the objections are submitted,

staff assigned to the grant programs begin reviewing and scoring the grants. Scoring criteria is generally part of the application instructions and you write the grant in such a way as to attempt to maximize the benefit to those criteria listed. In other words, you have to tell a good story (and yes, that story has to be the truth) and align that story and the budget narrative with the grant criteria. Scoring by staff generally takes an indefinite amount of time and only a rough estimate of when staff will complete their work is given up front, so the waiting game begins.

At almost the same time as this grant was submitted, we submitted another application for an “Energy Innovation” grant to offset the cost of installing the

three public EV chargers. This process went much quicker and we did not make the cut, even though we had what we thought was a pretty good proposal. This only reinforced the feeling that our broadband grant application was only a draft for future opportunities.

While the final decision for awarding grants lies squarely in the hands of the commissioners, they rarely make major adjustments to the staff recommendations and if they do, it usually involves a bit of shuffling on the tail end of the recommendation. When we saw that we were ranked #6 of the 24 recommended for funding we felt pretty confident and I sent out an email message to the board telling them I was pretty sure we got the grant.

With future funding opportunities

by the state currently limited and part of the budget process that will likely be resolved by the time you read this, we do believe that the fact that this application was specifically designed to “finish” the project played a role as well as scoring in the positive decision. This award takes us off the table for the Federal Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program. In our opinion, this is a significant advantage to us as that funding keeps getting pushed back as program development seems to be a struggle. In addition, compliance with the federal program is likely to be a bit more arduous than the program we won under as is illustrated by the requirements to the ARPA-funded grant we are currently working under.

GOVERNOR VISITS COOPERATIVE

We received word on Thursday, May 11, that Governor Evers wanted to visit the cooperative and see our broadband project. Initially, his staff asked if “between 4 and 4:30 p.m.” on Monday, May 15, would work for us. We asked if the governor intended to spend the night as the last boat leaves at 5 p.m. and were met with a “Oh my, you are an actual island” comment. The next day arrangements were made for him to visit on Thursday, May 18. He would fly into the Ephraim Airport and the State Patrol would get him to the 1 p.m. boat and he would leave on the 3 p.m. boat. After some additional confusion on the length of the ferry ride, the departure time was revised to

the 4 p.m. boat. During the conversation, we asked why he wouldn’t just land at the Island Airport and staff said his pilot and copilot were not comfortable with it.

We were also asked to come up with an itinerary for the governor’s visit. Since he specifically came to see the cooperative and talk broadband, we gave him a tour of the engine room and the new headend room, and we asked Clinton Triplett of Quantum to give him a splicing demonstration in the cooperative’s splicing trailer. This also gave us an opportunity to discuss the wise use of state funding in that our splicing trailer is brand new but was damaged during unloading from the factory and thus was purchased as a “salvage vehicle.” Our own board member Steve Fisco, who has some minor experience in body work (Fisco! Fisco! Fisco!) fixed it so it not only looks good, but is functional as well. After the splicing demonstration, Clinton told the governor, “Now it is your turn!” Governor Evers actually spliced fiber in our trailer.

We then had a round-table discussion of the importance of broadband to the economy, education, healthcare, and just general life after which the governor had a tour of the school where we (as part of our project) upgraded/



Robert Bjarnarson greets Governor Evers. (Photos courtesy of office of Tony Evers)





When we greeted the governor (more on his visit below) as he arrived at the cooperative, he said, while shaking hands, “Pretty good day, isn’t it?” My reply was, “You have no idea how good! We are very grateful to the commissioners and staff of the Public Service Commission.”

As you all know, we have been pretty lucky after a few moments of bad luck back in June of 2018. We have had lots of support from our fellow cooperatives, legislators, and lots of hard-won assistance. Tallying it up, since that really crappy day, we have not only gotten the job done, but we have brought back well over \$7,000,000 in funding (not counting the fact that there has been a fair amount of money spent right here on the Island as part of these projects). We

have now been successful in four of five PSC broadband grant applications, two in partnership with Nsight and two on our own. In addition, our NTIA grant application was denied because we were not a good enough photo opportunity (paraphrasing the debrief – my words). You win some and you lose some, but we feel pretty good about our overall take! You might say that all that crap is now growing some pretty nice tomatoes.

We have noted several times in these pages that the economics of this fiber project work even without grant funding.

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What this does for us is significantly decrease the debt load and hopefully speed up the process of finishing the project on the Island.

We say “hopefully” because now the daunting task of material acquisition and coinciding contractor scheduling will be the focus, and all may not go smoothly with the supply-chain issues that are facing most industries. We have to

have material available in order to schedule contractors, and contractors have to have openings in order to be scheduled, and in some cases, contractors have to have employees to do the work and they have to have a place to stay here on the Island while they work! As has been our usual track, we intend to continue to keep the money as local as we possibly can.

In addition, this is a “matching” grant program and our match is \$2,800,000. Obviously, this means we are not doing the project without debt! The great thing about this though, is that much like the last grant, some of our match will be spent on equipment that will have use way beyond the project and will benefit all of us for years to come. The equipment we obtained under the previous grant really has led multiple times to the question, “Why didn’t we have this years ago?”

As you have probably also noticed, we approach this equipment a bit differently than other operations. We focus on good used equipment to make our dollars go the furthest. That does not mean we won’t buy something new if there is a benefit to doing so (our mini-excavator was not only cheaper new than used, but also came with a five-year/5,000-hour on-site warranty and is manufactured in Georgia).

In addition, this puts the cooperative into a better position to accelerate our plans to hire up to three additional employees. Stay tuned for postings.

This may or may not be the last opportunity we have for grant funding related to the broadband project (we will keep looking) but we will also keep an eye out for other opportunities that benefit the community and the cooperative.



Left: Clinton Triplett demonstrates case preparation to Governor Evers. Right: Evers splicing fiber under Clinton Triplett’s watchful eye.

replaced a majority of the networking equipment. We noted that, not only is the school getting a true 1G connection, which was not even close to possible before, but we are saving the district huge dollars over the Badgernet system.

We had the governor pretty much captured for over two hours, which is pretty much unheard of. And, as we were walking out to the splicing trailer for the aforementioned demonstration, the governor’s plane flew over and landed at the Island Airport and he departed from there.

We are certain he and the staff that came with him left with a bit of a different perspective of how things can be done, money can be spent wisely, and how cooperatives can make a difference.

WORK CONTINUES IN SPITE OF GUBERNATORIAL VISITS

We have already taken up too much space with type to add much more, but here are a few photos to assure you that we are doing more than just hobnobbing with politicians.

Right: Karcz crew hanging strand and fiber on Jackson Harbor Road. Below: Karcz works to get conduit under a paved driveway.



TROUBLESHOOTING YOUR NEW HOME INTERNET CONNECTION

As is almost universal, there really is no such thing as “perfect” service. Much like the squirrel damage down the county noted in these pages a couple issues ago, things stop working for various reasons. Since we discussed what to expect when we are ready to connect

you, we thought now would also be a good time to discuss what to expect once you have been connected and what to do when a problem arises (and it eventually will). Remember, we are feeling our way into this industry and we do not want to do things like other ISPs.

We are working on a “refrigerator magnet” of initial steps to take when an issue arises before calling us or the call center. Sometimes it really is just as simple as turning off your device, counting to 10, and turning it back on again. More to come on this as we move forward.

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