

Public Comment: MBI, Montague, Hardwick Broadband Attn Sara J Clark

My name is Jeff Singleton and I write for the Montague Reporter, a local newspaper in Montague MA. I have covered the Broadband issue – including numerous meetings of the Montague Broadband Committee, a meeting with MBI, meetings where the issue was discussed with the local Selectboard and the May 24 meeting at the University of Massachusetts. I would like to make the following comments.

1. The gap between MBI and local committees is much too extreme if the broadband expansion process is really supposed to be a state-local collaboration. The MBI and the local officials do not seem to agree on anything, including the purpose of broadband extension legislation and the criteria for evaluating proposals.
2. Thus for example MBI and the local committees do not seem to agree on the number of unserved homes in the towns or the number each proposal (Comcast and Matrix) would serve. They do not agree on the criteria on this issue, that is whether serving more homes is considered a positive or only reaching the minimum threshold (96%) matters. Similarly, the local committees have considered Matrix willingness to consult with local officials a positive whereas MBI does not appear to have even considered this criteria. Perhaps most importantly advanced fiber is considered a big positive by the local committees whereas MBI does not seem at all concerned about the technology as long as it meets minimum broadband standards.
3. MBI concerns about the financial viability of the Matrix proposal are legitimate. Matrix should have produced a more detailed business plan, particularly revenue/expense estimates in response to the MBI-Tilson-WIPRO analysis. However MBI should have made a greater effort to engage the towns on this issue and more clearly establish the documentation needed to show financial viability. There also should be a much greater effort to resolve rather simple issues, such as the number of homes needed to sustain the Matrix proposal and whether Petersham homes could be counted in the business plan.
4. The Leverett complaints also reflect legitimate concerns. But MBI seriously undermined its credibility on this issue by not asking for Matrix' side of the story and peppering the audience on May 24 with quotes from unnamed Leverett officials. Also MBI has promoted the Leverett build out as its biggest success story but now the builder of that project is unqualified?

5. The MBI-Tilson report as presented at the May 23 meeting was extremely one-sided, ignoring local concerns, ignoring potential Comcast deficiencies, and appearing simply as a sharp attack on a proposal which local officials favor. This tone seriously undermined legitimate criticisms of Matrix financing and encouraged the view that MBI intended to give the contract to Comcast from the beginning.

6. This process has been a disaster, a replay of the WiredWest fiasco criticized in the Harvard Berkman Center study. The state should have the decency to recognize this and start again, with the first step being to get MBI and local officials on the same page re the goals of the legislation and criteria used to judge proposals.

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