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Infrastructure Advisory Council

Meeting Minutes

February 11, 2021

Attendees

- Colleen Bailie — West Haven Public Library
- Joe Campbell — Connecticut Technical High School System
- Doug Casey — Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- George Claffey — Central Connecticut State University
- Burt Cohen — Office of Consumer Counsel
- Tom Dillon — Independent
- Karen Fildes — New Fairfield Public Schools
- Kerri Kearney — Manchester Public Schools
- Ryan Kocsondy — Connecticut Education Network (CEN)
- Michael Mundrane — University of Connecticut
- Brandon Rush — New Milford Public Schools
- Susan Shellard — Department of Economic and Community Development
- Sabina Sitaru — New Haven Public Schools
- Rick Widlansky — Libraries Online (LiOn)
- Rob Wilson — Somers Public Schools

Agenda

- Broadband Legislation and Standards
- Digital Inclusion — Closing the Digital Divide
- Legislative Session
- Post-COVID Takeaways

Welcome

Tom Dillon, Chair of the Infrastructure Advisory Council, called the meeting to order at 10:00 AM and provided a brief overview of the agenda topics. He then asked Doug to introduce the first topic regarding the Governor's broadband bill and potential state connectivity standards.



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Broadband Legislation and Standards

Doug welcomed Advisory Council members and noted the flurry of new bills as part of the long legislative session. Of particular interest to the Commission is Governor Lamont's Act Concerning Equitable Access to Broadband ([HB-6442](#)). He asked Burt Cohen, the Office of Consumer Counsel's Broadband Policy Coordinator and a key contributor to the bill, to provide an overview of the proposed legislation. Burt greeted the meeting attendees and noted this as his first Advisory Council meeting as the Commission's newest member and offered these highlights of the bill:

- **Universal Access:** Providers would offer Internet to all households in their service areas by September 30, 2022 and not charge customers for "contributions in aid," or buildout expenses.
- **Minimum Speeds:** The bill requires all cable Internet providers to offer minimum of 1 gigabit per second (Gbps) download and 200 Gbps upload speeds by January 31, 2022.
- **Oversight:** The Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) would have oversight on the services and buildout progress of cable Internet providers. This work also includes a study by December 2021 on service resiliency.
- **Mapping:** The State would require providers to offer data enabling the accurate mapping of availability, down to the individual residence.
- **Broadband Classification:** The bill calls for the categorization of service providers across three classes, "well served," "adequately served," and "underserved" based on availability, speeds, and other technical specifications that Ryan Kocsondy of the Connecticut Education Network (CEN) and others defined.
- **Make-Ready:** PURA will develop protocols for electric and phone providers, which own Connecticut's telephone poles (the conduits of most cable Internet connections) on a "one touch" and "dig once" approach to streamlining buildout efforts.
- **Digital Equity:** The Commission will conduct an analysis and report on broadband and device availability for K – 12 and higher education students by July 31, 2023.

Doug thanked Burt for the summary and noted the significance of universal access in Connecticut, where many residents still cannot get broadband access. Burt echoed this and other key components of the legislation but noted that he expects significant opposition from carriers. He encouraged Advisory Council members and their constituents to provide spoken and written testimony in support of the bill. Ryan commented on the importance of having broadband standards, not prescriptive in terms of speeds but in terminology, allowing the State to update these measures as use of the Internet evolves. Karen Fildes of New Fairfield Public Schools asked if the bill was designed to encourage competition. Burt reiterated the key goal of universal access and stated that no impediments to competition exist, and he offered Go Net Speed as an example of a new provider in Connecticut markets. He did state that New England has not historically seen strong competition among cable Internet providers.



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Tom noted his proposal to [Representative Joe Gresko](#) to require public housing managers, which receive support from State agencies, to include broadband Internet access as part of rent. The idea has not yet taken the form of legislation and would help lower income residents take advantage of broadband for learning and advancement. Colleen Bailie of West Haven Public Library was encouraged by [SB-720](#), An Act Concerning Data Privacy, Net Neutrality, Cyber Security and Fairness in Data Usage in the New Age of a Digital Workforce, and Karen Fildes supported [SB-435](#), An Act Concerning Compliance with the Student Data Privacy Laws of the State. Doug thanked the members for their input and encouraged them to share their support or concerns with legislation with their elected representatives as well as the Commission.

Digital Inclusion — Closing the Digital Divide

Tom transitioned the discussion to address multiple efforts to provide students and the general citizenry with access to computers, broadband, and support to make full use of online resources. He described a [recent event in Stratford](#) through the [Digital Dreams Project](#) to refurbish and distribute phones and computers to needy residents. These devices, paired with Internet connections, allow residents to leverage telehealth resources and state services, among other applications.

Regarding connections and devices to help students continue with their studies, Doug provided an update on Governor Lamont's Everybody Learns initiative. In December, the State announced that all students who need computers have received them. Providing learners with home broadband connections remains more challenging. Doug has collected and shared data from cable Internet companies as well as cellular hotspot provider Kajeet to Connecticut's school districts, allowing them to assess original connectivity requests with fulfillment totals to date. His intent was to equip schools with information that may help identify reasons why absentee rates remain high in many districts that use remote learning as the primary means of instruction. In addition to sending this data to each district, Doug asked school leaders to respond to a brief survey to indicate the likely reasons why families have not taken advantage of free Internet through the Everybody Learns initiative. Reasons may include inflated estimates from districts this summer as well as reservations among families to begin service with Internet providers, even if there is no cost.

Acknowledging the need for human support and coaching to get more households online, Doug mentioned the efforts of Dawn La Valle of the Connecticut State Library in launching a statewide Digital Inclusion Task Force. The group, which includes Advisory Council members Burt Cohen and Doug Casey, among others, identifies existing programs, such as the one in Stratford, among libraries, schools, and community centers to equip residents with the computers, connections, and skills they need to make use of online resources. He also mentioned preliminary plans at the State to create a corps of "digital ambassadors" to help scale outreach efforts, helping to



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identify other household challenges that may vie against student attendance and engagement, such as food and housing insecurity.

Sabina Sitaru, outgoing chief information officer of New Haven Public Schools, and Colleen Bailie underscored the importance of personal support, noting the success that has come from teams of district administrators or librarians to help individual students or families. Both noted that many families do not even understand the difference between broadband and cellular Internet and so do not appreciate the benefits of a fixed, high-speed connection.

Burt pointed to resources outside of Everybody Learns to connect needy families through Congress's [Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020](#). As part of that law, the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) allows qualifying individuals to receive up to \$50 of Internet service free per month. He did express frustration that the program, administered by the Federal Communications Commission, includes no funding to promote or support the EBB program, a factor in whether it succeeds.

Advisory Council members shared their views the short- and long-term challenges to connecting students at home. Kerri Kearney of Manchester Public Schools cited a need to support ordering and installation logistics. In Manchester, her Family Resource Center team works with Cox Communications to address installation scheduling, often a challenge when families need to be at home for a technician's visit. She also expressed concern about the longer term goal of connecting students beyond the window covered by Everybody Learns funds. Doug shared [efforts in Nevada](#) to coordinate fulfillment steps with families, supported by a six-day-a-week call center of 150 individuals to take inbound calls and conduct outreach to families. Ryan also indicated that logistics and other "human factor" challenges have become the biggest challenges in rolling out the community wireless efforts that the CEN team leads as part of Everybody Learns. He did point to recent progress on this front, with a number of installations taking place over the next month. Doug thanked the members for their concerns and asked them to continue sharing existing programs and best practices — in Connecticut and elsewhere — that will help strengthen outreach and support efforts in the state.

The Advisory Council has engaged in work to provide community wireless through the Eduroam system, and Tom provided updates on this front. He expressed the need to educate the K – 12 community on the benefits of Eduroam, offering a tag line for consideration: "Eduroam gives Connecticut students a pass to thousands of Internet access points." Ryan and others welcomed the need to offer an easily understandable explanation of Eduroam but expressed concern that the "thousands of access points" currently reside only on college campuses. Michael agreed with Ryan and discouraged any misleading language, which could lead school leaders to distrust future messaging about Eduroam. He suggested instead the message that Eduroam has saturated higher education and proven successful there. The system holds tremendous potential if



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adopted by communities in partnership with colleges and universities. Karen Fildes echoed the need for a clear explanation. As a K – 12 technology leader, she had never heard of Eduroam and expressed strong interest in bringing the service to her town. Tom and Sabina offered their assistance in doing so, and Sabina cautioned that even with an aggressive timeline, implementing Eduroam can take a year to complete. Ryan shared that he intends to host at least one session at the [May 2021 CEN Conference](#) to raise awareness of Eduroam and the specific steps necessary to implement the system.

Post-COVID Takeaways

With limited time before the conclusion of the meeting, Doug welcomed takeaways and opportunities to leverage what worked in remote learning during the pandemic. He offered as an example from the February 5, 2021 Digital Learning Advisory Council meeting the idea of having a common catalog of online courses offered through the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities. At the K – 12 level, providing online courses in “niche” subjects with historically low attendance and taught in just a few districts could open these topics of study to students statewide.

Karen shared that administrators and teachers in New Fairfield were pleasantly surprised that some students thrive in remote learning environments. These learners generally have higher interest levels and agency, and she did not suggest that remote learning is ideal for all students. She did, however, see the advantage to some students of a part- or full-time online learning option. She also stressed the importance of specializing professional development for educators who teach in either online or in-person settings. Kerri agreed and noted that most success in remote learning has taken place through Manchester’s Online Learning Academy, especially where teachers have identified and honed approaches to small group instruction. Leaders in Manchester also see advantages of using time and scheduling creatively, takeaways in planning the 2021 – 22 school year. Michael concluded the conversation by noting the progress made by having many University of Connecticut faculty engaged in remote learning this past year. Professors there generally have a much higher comfort level than they did prior to COVID in supporting distance learning. He did underscore the difference between a natively digital approach to teaching and simply replacing an in-person lecture with streamed video of a professor. He also encouraged new ways of designing assessments of learning, given that students can take advantage of traditional testing instruments.

Adjournment

Tom concluded the meeting by thanking members for their time and insights. He encouraged them to reach out to him or any member of the Commission with ideas or concerns tied to digital learning. He concluded the meeting at approximately 11:30 AM.