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TO: Colchester Selectboard
FROM: Aaron Frank, Town Manager
DATE: November 30, 2023
RE: Broadband Update

Summary: Based on a review of the most current state information, considering the fiber now through Fidium Fiber and after reviewing the data in detail, there are only 51 occupied properties (0.78%) in Colchester which do not have at least cable speed 25/3 Mbps internet.

Background: Act 71, enacted in June 2021, created a framework for the distribution of millions of dollars in public funds for broadband expansion in Vermont. Funds distributed through Act 71 are limited to projects that bring high speed internet (at least 100/100 Mbps) to locations that are currently "unserved" and "underserved," meaning they have service of less than 4/1 Mbps and 25/3 Mbps, respectively.

Because Consolidated Communications and Comcast have extensive coverage within Colchester, most addresses in the Town are considered "served" with service of at least 25/3 Mbps. Specifically, the most recent State data available indicates there are only 102 addresses in Colchester that are defined as either "unserved" or "underserved," or about 1.6% of all the addresses in Town. The relatively low number of locations in Colchester which are eligible for Act 71 funding significantly limits Colchester's ability to access public funds for broadband expansion, which was a factor in the Selectboard's decision not to join the Chittenden County Communications Union District in 2022.

Without access to sufficient public funds to seriously incentivize private companies to undertake broadband expansion within Colchester, the Town and its residents have limited options to improve the availability of broadband. One Colchester neighborhood successfully used a State program to fund a cable-line extension that brought cable (not fiber) internet down Middle and East Roads, but that project was years in the making and limited in scope. The current framework for broadband funding in Vermont has therefore left Colchester in the position of waiting for private entities to determine that bringing broadband to "unserved" and "underserved" areas of the Town is a good business decision and financially viable.

Recent Developments: Over the past several years, Town staff have remained in contact with ISP providers in an attempt to learn about their potential expansion plans in Colchester. Consolidated Communications indicated they did have plans to start bringing fiber to portions of Colchester and other Chittenden County towns. Earlier in 2023, Consolidated began running fiber within several Chittenden County towns, including Colchester, under the name Fidium Fiber. By July 2023, Fidium had run fiber to approximately 1,300 addresses in Colchester.

By cross-referencing the list of 102 “unserved” and “underserved” addresses in Colchester with the online Fidium Fiber availability tool, it appears 36 addresses will have access to fiber through Fidium. Therefore, the recent Fidium Fiber expansion in Colchester has lowered the number of “unserved” and “underserved” addresses in Colchester by 35%, leaving 66 addresses as “unserved” or “underserved.” Interestingly, included among the addresses where Fidium Fiber recently expanded are addresses on Middle and East Roads where residents had previously worked tirelessly to secure funding for a cable-line extension. Those addresses now have access to both cable internet and fiber.

After the recent Fidium Fiber expansion, only about 1% of all addresses in Colchester are still “unserved” or “underserved” on the State list. Of these 66 addresses that remain on the State list, 32 (0.49%) are year-round residential properties, 19 (0.29%) are seasonal properties, four are duplicates, three are properties with no buildings, three are Law Island and Sunset Island in Outer Malletts Bay; and five are commercial or government properties where we have verified 25/3 internet exists (95XXX, Myers Container Service, and Camp Johnson). Based on a review of the most current State information, considering the fiber now in place and available through Fidium Fiber and after reviewing the data in detail, there are only 51 occupied properties (0.78%) in Colchester which do not have at least cable speed 25/3 Mbps internet.

Going Forward: Town staff will continue to monitor funding availability and opportunities to partner with other towns or businesses to improve the quality of internet service available to residents and businesses. While Act 71 and associated funding focused on addresses with the most critical need (25/3 Mbps service or less), the vast majority of addresses in Colchester have service between 25/3 and 100/100 Mbps. Broadband of at least 100/100 Mbps is regarded as level of broadband service needed to truly meet today’s demands (fiber offers 1000 Mbps). Significant investment would be needed over time to bring that level of broadband service throughout Colchester.