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## 10-Year Telecommunications Plan – Final Draft Hearing Transcript

The following is the transcript from the public hearing held on May 16th, 2024, in Springfield Vermont, where the Public Service Department presented the final draft of the 10-Year Telecommunications Plan.

Thurs, May 16, 2024 5:00PM

Alex Kelley – RISI

It's a pleasure to be here. My name is Alex. I was part of the team that helps the department put together this plan. I'm going to do a short presentation with some of the highlights of the plan, which you can pull up partly if you want, and then we'll open the floor to comments. I would encourage people, if they haven't read the entirety of the final draft, to please do so. It's linked on the department's website. This presentation, while it will cover some of the main points, it can't be comprehensive of a document with that much content in it. So umm, without any further ado, you can go to the next slide. Let's get past, the picture of the field and Hardwick. There we go. So you have a little bit of context about the plan that this 2024 plan, what we focused on this year. We'll go through some of the highlights of the research and analysis that went to the plan. I'll talk through some of the changes to the plan that happened between the first draft and the final draft due to public comments, and then we'll go through findings and recommendations and a few of the plans major categories.

Alex Kelley – RISI

So the 2024 10-year plan, as with all of the 10 year plans is guided by goals established in Statute 30, Visa 202C and it's created in accordance with the process established by statute in 30 VSA 202-D. So there's very particular requirements for the content and the process of the plan. This plan in particular is coming at a moment in time where Vermont has had a significant resources that they've been able to devote to broadband, in particular through some federal programs, including the American Rescue Plan, Capital Projects Fund and broadband equity access and deployment programs, and those three pots of federal funding have gone primarily in the telecommunications space to deploying last mile fiber broadband across the

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state. And because the B program in particular has very specific rules that the state needs to follow with how it deploys that funding, and it also requires the state to create a really robust infrastructure deployment plan as well as the digital equity plan, we have focused this 10 year plan on elements that augment those other simultaneous plans rather than replace because we want it to be efficient with the funding and not work across ways to what was required by federal statute. So a quick summary of the research and analysis that went into the plan. We did a landline and cell phone-based survey of statistically significant sampling front residence. Talked to about 500 residents. We did online surveys of businesses, healthcare professionals and public safety professionals. We did individual stakeholder interviews, one on one interviews with over 55 public and private sector leaders.

Alex Kelley – RISI

We did a statewide mobile wireless engineering design and coverage analysis and we did what's called an input output force analysis to look at the size of the states broadband workforce and the size of we'll need to grow in order to accommodate the amount of fiber construction that's anticipated in the next five years.

Also want to just thank everyone who's participated in the public input sessions. Thus far we've had input over 55 meetings like this, as well as comments through the website and via email. We've advertised the sessions on WCAX statewide media. We've done a number of additional things to solicit feedback and grateful to everyone who's provided feedback on the plan up until this point. That feedback has touched, I think, every single section of the plan. I won't go through this line by line, but suffice it to say that between the first draft and this draft, the input we've received from people across the state has been really invaluable in shaping the strategies and the analysis that underpins the work.

Alex Kelley – RISI

So with the, you know residential broadband coverage and specifically wireline coverage in the state, the plan demonstrates that the fiber coverage is expanding

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rapidly. That's what we want to be happening and that is happening nonetheless. Numerous stakeholders we talked to identified some small challenges with the ongoing processes. Vermont is on track to pass all on grid premises with fiber to the home by 2029 or or at least infrastructure capable of 100 / 100. That being said, our analysis shows very clearly that Vermont really needs to grow as broadband construction workforce. Umm, which is the sector that actually shrank in Vermont from 2018 to 2022. So we're working to rebuild that. We also want to highlight in this presentation that fiber infrastructure owners and builders, so I did some real concerns about the possibility of needing to bury significant portions of their network in the next 10 to 15 years as a part of utility hardening exercises. And that's important because what because the cost and responsibilities of that are not clear to everyone, it's those costs and responsibilities aren't able to be incorporated into current business planning and projections, which is really important as fiber networks are being built across the state. Lastly, a about a month and 1/2 ago as we were wrapping up this plan, the Agency of Transportation stopped issuing right of way application fee waivers for broadband builders in on and underserved areas and that has increased the cost of deployment and that became an issue again about two months ago.

Alex Kelley – RISI

Mobile wireless side, you know stakeholders overwhelmingly noted that mobile wireless service is critical in the state and our analysis showed that those speeds have increased in terms of the speeds that people can receive. For example, on their cell phones, the coverage has not significantly increased over the past five years, so the vast majority of businesses said that mobile wireless coverage in Vermont is not adequate for their business needs. A clear majority of Vermonters also agreed that the state should use public funds to improve coverage in the state. And again, as I mentioned, the speeds have increased since 2018, but the actual coverage areas saw a little to no expansion and 412 miles of road in the state. We estimate currently do not have mobile broadband coverage from any provider. Lastly, really important to note the engineering analysis we performed shows that a significant portion of those

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unserved areas can be efficiently covered by what we're calling small wireless facilities. Those are essentially facilities that are 50 feet tall rather than the standard 140 foot towers. That and that are also used so you know those kinds of more aesthetically subtle and unobtrusive towers can make significant progress to closing the 1st 50% of mobile wireless gaps in the state. So in the affordability department, obviously affordability of broadband, both fixed and mobile service is critical. In particular, it's being hammered currently by the sunset of the federal Affordable Connectivity project, or program. Sorry, that was a program that was offering qualifying low income households \$30.00 a month off of a broadband subscription. Either fixed or mobile and that program is currently winding down. They've cut the benefits in half until the money that was originally allocated runs out, which will happen, I think next month, you know, importantly the stakeholders we spoke to noted that particularly in Vermont having both a fixed and mobile subscription fixed being at your home and mobile being you know for a cell phone for example are important. However, the federal program was not applicable to both. You could only use it for one or the other. And lastly, we heard very compelling umm testimony from healthcare workers about how continuous mobile coverage and access to a device that can support mobile broadband is absolutely critical for helping particularly unhoused Vermonters access care.

Alex Kelley – RISI

But that is the continuous link they need to services in order to be consistent with accessing services in Vermont. So, and the public safety realm, there's a currently a public safety communications task force that got going in February this year in the middle of writing the plan to evaluate certain changes to the telecommunications, public safety, telecommunications landscape in Vermont and in particular, one of the things they're looking at is the possibility of consolidating the public safety answering points in Vermont. We created content in the plan that we hope can inform their work. Another important thing is that you know we report in the plan on 1st net deployment progress. First net is the AT&T service that allows public safety and 1st responders to access priority mobile broadband services. So over 51st net

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sites have been deployed in Vermont. Not all of those are new towers.

In fact, it's about 5050. Which ones are new towers and which ones are upgrades to existing towers? That being said, the overwhelming majority of public safety officials who took our survey, said, that they report reported that they lose mobile service on the job. So clearly there are still significant gaps in our communities. And lastly, when as we were exploring different public safety communications issues, we heard from many people who wanted us to flag that the statewide communication interoperability plan, also known as the Skip. Umm, you know, there's there are good ideas and ideas who want to pursue in there that the state wants to pursue. However, it lacks local funding, in order to do that. Lastly, we took a look at the governing statutes that dictate the content of the telecom plan. The process of the plan, as well as statutes that relate to adjacent telecommunications rules in the states, such as Act 71 and we provided this analysis a couple pieces in that analysis.

Alex Kelley – RISI

One, there's some. There's some discrepancies or slight misalignments between the broadband speed definitions and the deployment parameters across the different statutes. It's also important to note that during the creation of this plan, the SEC in fact upgraded their definition of broadband from 25 / 3 megs to 100 / 20 megs. Umm well, the thing we note is that the statutorily mandated end date for the VCB of July 1st, 2029 is before all the bead program activities are likely to happen. In particular, some of the bead monitoring and compliance activities that will need to happen after that. And then lastly, just as a kind of global comment here, the statutory goals that dictate the telecommunications priorities of the state, some of them are quite old and in fact some of them were drafted almost 40 years ago and they do contain overlapping and nonspecific language that may cause confusion or lack of focus with making sure all the telecommunication stakeholders in the state are rowing in the same direction.

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Harlie Quero – PSD Communications Coordinator

I'm sorry to interrupt, Alex. I just have to take us off the shared screen so I can repin the other interpreter.

Alex Kelley – RISI

Great.

Harlie Quero – PSD Communications Coordinator

Sorry about that.

Alex Kelley – RISI

No worries. Give me a chance to catch my breath.

Harlie Quero – PSD Communications Coordinator

I don't know where my mouse is going either, which is the part of the problem.

Alex Kelley – RISI

Also, shout out to the Black River Innovation campus for hosting us in Springfield.

It's a fantastic space. If and if folks haven't been highly encourage it, come here and cwork if you're in the area.

Alex Kelley – RISI

We will jump back in and summarize for the recommendations in the plan and then open floor to comments. So in the plan, we recommend a range of actions that could make wireline deployment more efficient, #1 reinstating the Agency of Transportation right of way, Fee waivers, at least until the state achieves universal 100 / 100 coverage. The state, you know, part of the statutory goals of this plan are to help the state understand how to leverage the right of way. And this is really how you do it. You make sure it's as easy as possible to to deploy broadband in Vermont #2. We hope that the folks doing really good fiber broadband training the state currently use our analysis to scale their training programs up to ensure that

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Vermont's workforce is that is robust enough to execute on a construction we're anticipating over the next five years.

Alex Kelley – RISI

And then lastly, we're recommending a that the public service department and a coalition of others clarify the anticipated costs and responsibilities of bearing infrastructure over the next 10 to 15 years, because that really does impact the ISPs that are building broadband. Today, your financials, they're proformas and this work should be done with the focus on finding opportunities for savings and alignment. Second, based on the analysis we did of mobile coverage in the state, we are recommending what we're calling a small facilities wireless pilot grant program. So again, these are the communications towers that are 50 feet tall or lower. Umm, we're recommending 2 to \$3 million at first to do a first iteration of that program and we list in the plan significant amount of data we suggest is collected through that pilot program to refine for future iterations. And we're also recommending some updated data collection practices in general to just again strengthen the state's ability to do robbing, planning and mobile wireless planning, including repeating the drive test, which I know has been funding for that has been requested as well as some changes to what what's requested during the 248 eight permit process. So with affordability, especially with the federal affordable connectivity program going away, if Vermont wants to make this a priority, we will need to step up and fill the gap we suggest in the plan some metrics for how to define what should be considered affordable service, who should be eligible for programs, etcetera. The conclusion of that is we think that a \$67 a month program to qualifying low income Vermonters that can cover both wireline and wireless are both fixed and mobile. Rather, it is what's appropriate for the state and again, due to the importance of mobile devices and a consistent connection to housing and secure Vermonters, we do recommend that the legislature allocate funding and work with Human Services providers to make sure unhoused Vermonters have a device and a connection in order to access continuous care and services.

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Alex Kelley – RISI

So we dedicated significant Inc in the plan to an analysis of what public safety answering point consolidation could look like. We're hoping that the public safety communications task force finds that valuable, although it is ultimately their decision how to recommend the state proceed. We also do agree with the stakeholder feedback that the skip needs to be funded at the state level in certain regards in order to make progress on that the interoperability plan. And then lastly, part of strengthening the States emergency communications is making sure our networks are as resilient and redundant as they can be and the leverage that the state has right now to make sure that happens is with some of the grant making that's going on. So we put a significant information in there about resiliency and redundancy as it relates to public safety. And as it relates to climate change, we hope that that is useful for the state as they and as they deploy funding and facilitate the construction of new networks over the next five years. Lastly, we provide a number of recommendations for how the state should think about and have the legislature should think about modernizing the statutes. There we point out areas where 202C and 202-D could be better aligned with ACT 71. We do recommend extending the Vermont Community Broadband Board sunset date beyond so that they can provide adequate oversight and monitoring and be deployments. And lastly, we provide recommendations on how the 10 telecommunications statutory goals might be modernized to more better align with the deployment strategies and the deployment frameworks that the state has established and is undertaking.

Alex Kelley – RISI

Thank you all very much and we will pull the presentation down and open the floor to anyone who has comments.

Harlie Quero – PSD Communications Coordinator  
It doesn't look like we have, anyone else with us.



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Alex Kelley – RISI

OK, you can go on mute and if anyone joins and wants to comment, they can speak up.

Hunter Thompson - PSD Director of Telecommunications  
Absolutely great.

Hunter Thompson - PSD Director of Telecommunications  
Also, we have a message. Hi Amy. Welcome to the final session of the 10 year final draft of the 10 year telecom plan. Do you have public comment?

Aaron Brassard – PSD Fiber Optic Project Manager  
If you do, you're muted. No comment.

Harlie Quero – PSD Communications Coordinator  
You want me to take us off for you or no?

Hunter Thompson - PSD Director of Telecommunications  
No, leave us until we get some confirmation.

Harlie Quero – PSD Communications Coordinator  
Then you see there, but we're still in muted. So you can explain that.

Aaron Brassard – PSD Fiber Optic Project Manager  
Amys said. In the teams, there is no sound on our channel. It appears your microphone is muted as this intentional.

Hunter Thompson - PSD Director of Telecommunications  
So Amy if you can hear us then, yes, we muted after the presentation by Alex because there are currently no in person or on the phone participants on that's why we unmuted when we saw you you're unsure where you were from or who you were

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with and Alex told us you were with SAPA. And they're talking about they're out finishing the presentation. Yeah, just to be clear, OK.

Alex Kelley - RISI

And Trudy can obviously hear us, though.

That's true, us.

Hunter Thompson - PSD Director of Telecommunications

So you have 7 minutes to go. So, this meeting has a couple minutes to go.

Hunter Thompson - PSD Director of Telecommunications

So it is 557 to introduce myself, I am information Director of Telecommunications connectivity with the public service department. This will conclude our session of the public hearing of the final draft version of the 10-year telecom plan. I'd like to thank the interpreters for their services and thank you SAPA for coming and broadcasting us if you have any comments on the plan, you can look at our website and they can be submitted via email. You can either get hold of us via email, or you can call, or I guess text too. I think my phone number is out there. Thank you everybody for attending and have a great evening. Bye bye.