Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission
Minutes of the Meeting
September 27, 2021 – 4:00 p.m.
Cisco Webex Meeting

The one hundred and forty-ninth meeting of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission was called to order by Chairman Rich Fitzgerald.

Members: Darin Alviano, Jennifer Beer, Mike Belding, Kevin Boozel, Morgan Boyd, Scott Bricker, Gina Cerilli Thrasher, Douglas Chew, Ali Doyle, Pat Fabian, Rich Fitzgerald, James Gagliano, Kim Geyer, Shelia Gombita, Joe Grata, Kelly Gray, Bob Griffin, Lynn Heckman, Sherene Hess, Diana Irey Vaughan, Clifford Levine, Bob Macey, Larry Maggi, Betsy McClure, Kevin McCullough, Leslie Osche, Mavis Rainey, Aurora Sharrard, Nick Sherman, Larry Shifflet, Byron Stauffer, and Vince Vicites.

Others: Dusty Kirk, Reed Smith.

Staff: Vincent Valdes, Mary Brangan, Kirk Brethauer, Ronda Craig, Margaret Fonner, Chuck Imbrogno, Tom Klevan, Jennifer Lasser, Shannon O'Connell, Dee Pamplin, Kay Tomko, and Andy Waple.

1. Chairman Fitzgerald called to order the September 27, 2021 meeting of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission.

   - Quorum – There being a quorum present the meeting proceeded.
   - Any conflict of interest declaration on action items – None

2. Action on Minutes of the August 30, 2021 Minutes

A motion was made to approve the minutes of the August 30, 2021 meeting by Commissioner Fabian which was seconded by Mavis Rainey. The affirmative vote was unanimous.

3. Public Comment – None

4. Financial Report – Margaret Fonner

Margaret Fonner reported on the financials for July 2021. Stating that we have revenues of $839,432 and expenditures of $839,932. This represents approximately 6% of the budget.

There were no questions for Mrs. Fonner on the financial report.

5. Regional Connectivity Improvement Program – Andy Waple

Andy gave an update on the progress of the connectivity improvement program for broadband access across the region. This wide-reaching program is going to examine the current true state of the region's broadband connectivity, in relation to the region's demographic and socio-economic composition.   The intent is to ensure its recommendations will help to equitably serve the region's most vulnerable populations who are underserved by current connectivity and do it in an equitable systematic way.

These are the major tasks that are included in the scope of work and those that are highlighted are the ones that are underway as we speak.

    Scope of Work
1. Project Administration and Project Kick-off
2. **Regional Engagement and Data Collection**
3. **Establish Regional Vision, Goals and Strategies**
4. Measures of Effectiveness
5. Project Development
6. **Governance Structure, Funding and Implementation**
7. Lessons Learned
8. Final Report

With our Steering Committee in place, we kicked off the meetings earlier this month. The Steering Committee is comprised of Carnegie Mellon, Allies for Children, Allegheny Conference, The Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, the Hillman Family Foundation, the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania. Some SPC counties are also serving on the Steering Committee, Allegheny, Beaver, Indiana and Westmorland. There will be ample opportunity for all SPC counties to be involved in the project. We also have two of the region's intermediate units represented on the Steering Committee, Indiana and Allegheny Counties.

The Regional Advisory Committee is the mechanism that the rest of the counties in a broad, list of stakeholders, representing all facets of community and economic development, nonprofits, elected officials, and broadband industry groups. We have a list of people that we're going to be inviting to participate on the Regional Advisory Committee. The intent of the committee is to advise the project team on emerging issues, from subject matter experts. We're working with the Steering Committee to finalize the list of the Regional Advisory Committee to begin having meetings. We're anticipating four to five meetings of the Advisory Committee between now and the end of November.

As I mentioned, stakeholder engagement is a huge part of this initiative. The Regional Engagement and Data Collection has four parts:

1. Market research survey, done by phone and on-line
2. Website, social media, and community engagement packet
3. Allies for Children Outreach will be community conversations
4. Provider and industry expert outreach

The four parts will be accomplished by: 1. access to and usage to technology equipment and broadband service; 2. is focused around affordability; 3. barriers to connectivity market research survey; 4. is for future communication preferences. We're going to be developing a web page so we can keep track of the demographics of the of the survey respondents. That's already developed, but it's going to be populated on the SPC website.

Allies for Children is heading up a series of workshops called Community Conversations which will capture the human aspect of broadband connectivity and using it to build support.

We used the mapping applications that we previewed at a previous meeting that identified all of the areas that have low income folks and households with no access to vehicles or limited English proficiency, and we used the GIS through that to identify strategic locations, geographically dispersed throughout the region to target these meetings and then we'll also be talking to industry and provider experts.

Mavis Rainey asked can you briefly walk through how you're going to engage folks prior to the data collection. For example, are you working within the stakeholder groups you just mentioned? Is there going to be engagement with community organizations or religious groups? How do you make sure? Someone who is going to be receiving the phone call doesn't know if it might be a potential scam.

Andy said we're going to be working with community groups, to be headed up by Allies for Children and the United Way. Working through faith-based organizations, school groups, nonprofits, to help get the word out. We'll be developing media packets and outreach surveys making the data collection one kind of integrated effort. We'll be reaching out to these people and looking at their constituencies to help us bolster the data that we already have. So that's our intent, to get folks on board to really gather additional data and make sure that we're representing the true need of the region.

Ms. Rainey thanked Andy.

Andy continued saying we're working to establish regional goals, visions and strategies, and working with local champions to spread the word. We have five groups of people identified to help us get the word out, the Regional Advisory Committee, the SPC Public Participation Panels. We're looking at partners responsible for delivering the network. Working with influencers, elected officials, state and federal agencies, your faith-based organizations and your community leaders from across the region. And then finally, the beneficiaries, those are your social service centers, senior centers, school districts, libraries, PTOs, health care centers, and chambers of commerce. Groups from all industries and representation from across the region.

We're looking at developing a set of measures of effectiveness.
 Impacted households, businesses, and community anchor institutions
 Affordability and reliability of service
 Equity, digital inclusion and literacy
 Jobs created
 Workforce development and training
 Impact on Connectivity Opportunity areas

We will be tracking these measures and targets to report on the project implementation and project development on progress through the grant application process, but also for us, and serving the underserved areas across the region and we'll be tracking these measures as a part of project development and project implementation. This is essential for any program where you're going out and trying to secure federal funding. Some of the questions that you can anticipate on these applications are: How is this going to help? What is it going to do? Do you have a good track record of previous grant applications?

Project development work is under way to develop a funding matrix of available grant programs and their timelines and requirements. The implementation roadmap, what types of infrastructure or high speed and connectivity infrastructure best suits different geographic areas across the region. And what types of procurement and delivery can be used for each type of project and then also have the consultants developing a decision lens prioritization module to help prioritize the specific projects from across the region.

Governance structure funding and implementation research is underway now looking across the country at different examples of regional organizations or regional setups to help drive and guide and support the implementation of highspeed connectivity.

I mentioned the funding matrix, which is going to be directly developed to the project development task, matching the types of funding available for different types of deployments or if it's affordability programs or equipment programs. We should have that well before the end of this project. We just kicked it off at the beginning of August, and we're looking to wrap this up at the end of January. This is a very aggressive timeframe and a very aggressive project.

Commissioner Osche asked what will the end-product look like and what will our role need to be when you've reached that point?

Andy said the end-product will be a set of different deployments. We're going to have a list of projects and areas for deployment matched to the appropriate deployment technology, cost estimates, and implementation recommendations. We're going to have a set of recommendations for a governance structure, with a list of funding mechanisms directly tied to the projects. Each project will have a recommendation on the best program to pursue, and the way to fund it. Lastly, we have the team of Michael Baker International located outside of Moon Township on retainer for three years, which could turn into five years. It's a three-year contract with two one-year extension options to really help

whatever type of regional organization or regional framework, or support to the counties and support to counties working with providers.

Commissioner Osche asked for those of us who are trying to work with their communities, doing public hearings, listening to how we should invest rescue act dollars. Is there a recommendation at all? Also, what should be set aside for broadband?

Andy said for broadband, there very well could be. It's too early in the process right now; but, if recommendations on how to spend rescue act funds is something that you all desire, that certainly is something we can look into.

Commissioner Osche asked: Do you anticipate that there would be other funding sources? Andy responded, yes, there are billions of dollars already out there through the COVID relief fund, and through Nita. And then also, the infrastructure bill that's being discussed, I think, has 65 billion dollars for broadband infrastructure.

6. Overview of Economic Development Administration (EDA) American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) – Jenn Lasser

There are six innovative challenges to build back better, the economic adjustment assistance, travel, tourism, outdoor recreation, a good jobs challenge, indigenous communities in statewide planning and networks. What's really special about this is EDA has allocated $300 million to support coal communities as they recover from the pandemic to help them create new jobs, new opportunities and including the expansion of whether it's a new industry sector or helping to adjust folks get from one area of occupation to another.

They'd love to see regional coalitions emerge with a focus on collaboration versus competition. They want to see projects that are going to allow for growth resiliency.
We held a virtual meeting on September 8th for municipalities and local governments specifically on EDA ARPA dollars with over186 folks logged on, which means there's a need to learn more about it.

After the meeting, we put out a survey to understand what are their needs and what are some potential projects. Because what we're seeing is that not everything is going to be a perfect fit for this. But as Andy mentioned, we have infrastructure programs that are going to be coming out and lots of other federal rescue type programs. I think it's exactly what we're doing along the broadband side of things, is that we're making sure that we are as agile as possible to go after these dollars. We also created a website for this. It's under https://www.spcregion.org/ARPA. It has the slides for all the different programs as well as the recording of the webinar that we hosted. I'm reminding everybody of this in case you have some project ideas in mind, let's talk about them. A lot of the things that I've seen come across through the survey are blight, water flooding. In terms of the American Rescue Plan it's going to have a real strong tie to jobs and regional resiliency. As we start to put together those projects, we need to make sure that focus is there.

At a minimum, it's important that we're hearing what your needs are. So, as these programs do come out, we can quickly apply for them, other than build back better, which has an application due date of October 19th, which is being prepared by the Allegheny Conference and their teams, along with SPC, Catalyst Connections, and multiple other stakeholder agencies. There's going to be another two billion dollars that are up for grabs. I think that, as a region, we can absolutely come together and do additional projects that are running parallel to that. I just wanted to remind everybody about these dollars. You're going to hear me continue to talk about them because this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for funding that we may not ever see again. Thank you for your time. Any questions you have I can do my best to answer.

The Chairman thanked Jenn; and asked if there are any questions for Jenn on either one of these plans?

Yes, Scott Bricker I represent Pittsburgh. I'm just curious. Could some of these dollars go toward trail development? Number 3 is travel tourism, outdoor recreation. But what could the dollars specifically be used for?

Jenn said sure, if there's an economic development tie to jobs workforce, it could go to trail development. For example, if you added so many miles of trail that's going to allow you to have new business come into the area and is now going to offer 300 jobs. It needs that tie specifically because it's Economic Development Administration. And that would fall under the travel tourism, an outdoor recreation grant.

If you have a specific project in mind that you'd want to talk about, feel free to email, call, and we can kind of work through it. There are a couple other trail projects, and this would be a good opportunity to bring them all together and do that regional effort to show that these 10 trail projects put together could promote X amount of dollars back into the community. It's going to have this level of impact and this is where, that regional coalition piece is very much about the greater good, the greater impact. So, yes, if you have that project in mind, please reach out and let me know. My can get my contact information out to you, but I would love to hear about your project.

Chairman asks, any other questions for Jenn. Thank you, Jenn.

7. Message from the Executive Director – Vincent Valdes
    Next Meeting Date – October 25, 2021

Thank you, Mr. Chairman yes, and I'm just following onto what Jenn just spoke about. In fact, I spoke about this at the Executive Committee and Board meeting earlier.

In fact, it really is about having a coalition for our region to talk about efforts beyond the build back better program as, you know, we've been part of the build back better discussion and that's working very well. The partnerships here are remarkable in terms of creating that new industry capability for our region as Jenn mentioned, that's only one part of the EDA agenda. I suggested at the last meeting that we put together a working

group that really reflects the rural needs as well. In fact, trails may be part of that discussion as. So that we're talking about, not just necessarily this Brave New World of technology in terms of, artificial intelligence and automation and robotics, but that we're talking about perhaps closer projects that are reflective of needs in our rural communities.

This morning I spoke to the EDA folks, and they were very, very adamant about needing to reflect rural needs as well as urban needs or suburban needs and so they want that full kind of sweep of projects across a given region. This is creating more opportunities since we have six separate branches of availability here in these projects. It's important to capture the full sweep of regional needs. We will be establishing a working group to really look at what the potential is in terms of tourism.

What agricultural projects might emerge other than clean water for example, and what that means in terms of economic development for a given region and again thinking also to compliment what we're learning and what we're doing and to build back better program. You'll see a notice from us in terms of launching this working group shortly and I'm very excited to do this in parallel to the build back better effort. There's time to do this as the applications are due in March. We have a little more time for the projects that are beyond the build back better trench and so that gives us time to really develop these projects.

The other thing I wanted to share with everyone in the Commission, and we'll do a deeper presentation in the next meeting, which is October 25th. Is that we have been working to really kind of think about what the SPC looks like as an organization. In five months, gone from not having a strategic plan for the SPC to having developed one that we shared with our own staff. We're now working on an implementation plan based on that strategic plan, and we're really creating a future state for the template for what the agency is going to look like in the future. You can't fight future battles with the army of the past, so you need to kind of reinvigorate and reinvent yourself from time to time.

We're currently creating that reinvention template. Again, I think we've done remarkable in a short period of time given the COVID constraints. Commissioner Osche was talking about the lack of connectivity when you're doing virtual meetings. It's very difficult to think about these strategic efforts in a virtual environment. Well, now that we're back in the office, we can really kind of talk to each other about what the future of SPC is going to look like. And we'll be happy to share that vision with you next month when we have the implementation plan fully developed. I'm very excited for that reset button for SPC.

Chairman Fitzgerald said make sure those issues that Mavis Rainey and Scott Bricker brought forth are discussed at Commissioner Osche's Regional Policy Committee meeting, so they can be delved into more deeply. There's lots of plans that are out there, whether it's through the RIDC, Allegheny Conference and Commissioner Beer, who is on this Commission, representing the Chamber of Commerce. A lot of collaboration among all the groups moving forward so we want to make sure that we're doing that in a very positive manner

8. Other SPC Business

Chairman Fitzgerald asked if there were any questions for the director, or any other business that we need to consider this evening. Hearing none I want to thank everybody for a robust attendance tonight, both in person and on Webex. Thank you for your participation and as Vince said, there's going to be a lot more in depth at the October 25th meeting.

9. Adjourn

This meeting is adjourned, thank you.

Respectfully Submitted,

Pat Fabian
Secretary-Treasurer