

State Board of Education & Early Development
Unapproved Minutes
October 21, 2020
Department of Education & Early Development
801 West 10th Street
Juneau, AK 99801

Wednesday, October 21, 2020

Chairman Fields called the meeting to order on October 21, 2020 at 3:03pm. Roll call was taken and a quorum established. Members present included: Member Griffin, First Vice Chair Hamilton, Member Kowalski, Member Stockhausen, Second Vice Chair Van Diest, Student Advisor Scott and Chair Fields. After the pledge of allegiance, First Vice Chair Hamilton motioned to adopt the agenda for October 21, 2020 the motion was seconded by Second Vice Chair Van Diest. The agenda was adopted. There were no potential conflicts of interest identified.

Work Session

Agenda Item 1. Commissioner's Report.

a. DEED Updates

Commissioner Johnson gave the board a quick update on DEED's work regarding their continued monitoring of COVID-19 in the various school districts in Alaska. He then reminded the board that, at their September meeting, they asked for an update on broadband issues around the state and introduced Christine O'Connor. Ms. O'Connor is the Executive Director of the Alaska Telecom Association which is the trade association for telecom companies in Alaska.

Commissioner Johnson highlighted the work by Senator Hoffman's office during the last legislative session to increase the broadband assistance grants for students across the state and thanked the senator for his work on that bill. He also encouraged the board and everyone listening to get a flu shot so that it will help with the overall effort to keep schools open during this season.

b. The State of Broadband in Alaska- Presentation by Christine O'Connor, Executive Director of Alaska Telecom Association

Executive Director O'Connor thanked the board for their interest in broadband. She began by giving her background and the historical background of the Alaska Telecom Association. Their membership ranges from small family owned companies to statewide companies. They have seven community owned cooperatives for privately owned companies to large publicly traded companies one municipal division and one employee owned company. She discussed the difference between the different kind of broadband providers and the different services that they provide and then discussed some of the projects which are expanding broadband in Alaska.

She detailed the difference between mobile and fixed broadband, and, while generally not ideal for a replacement for a fixed broadband service, mobile broadband is becoming a more and more powerful tool to address connectivity issues across the state. She then went into a discussion on the difference between middle mile and last mile connections in broadband networks. Last mile connections are the connections that connect your house to your broadband provider but, alone, it cannot connect anyone to the internet. In order to do that, you need middle mile connections which are the more robust fiber optic cables that run from Alaska to the lower 48. Other forms of middle mile connections include microwave networks or connection satellites when it is not practical or cost effective to run fiber optic cable. Alaska's geographical size limits us in our middle mile connections and many communities are still served only by satellites which are more limited much more limited in capacity and they often have latency or lag in that connection and they can suffer from interference from weather snow, rain, wind or all of the above.

Executive Director O'Conner then detailed the dramatic updates that have been occurring in middle mile networks in Alaska and walked the board through the new projects that are working to further connect Alaskan communities to the internet. Providers such as GCI and MTA have been working to expand their network equipment and platforms to meet the increased demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She included projects such as the project to build an undersea cable that will connect Alaska to Canada as well as the project to connect Alaska to the lower 48 through Canada. She also discussed the federal appropriations from Congress that are allowing Alaskan companies to fast track broadband services and build networks that are faster and available to more communities across the state. She thanked our congressional delegation for their work to convince DC policy makers to first take action and then move the needle on broadband and Alaska.

She encouraged the board to continue their support of broadband across the state because the work is not done. There are still large gaps in connectivity and service to our remote students and districts in Alaska. She also reminded the board that community support is essential to score well for companies to apply and be successful in accessing the federal broadband grants that are available. She highlighted the work of the Denali Commission and their work with the USDA to support broadband opportunities for Alaska. At the end of her presentation, she took questions from the board.

c. Board Comments

Chair Fields thanked Executive Director O'Conner for her presentation and for the Alaska Telecom Association's work to bring these communications companies together for Alaska and bringing broadband to the students of Alaska. He highlighted the importance of making sure that the students have what they need to be successful with regards to internet and broadband access.

Commissioner Johnson thanked Executive Director O'Conner for her presentation and encouraged the board to be strong advocates for increased connectivity to the students across the state.

Chairman Fields adjourned the meeting without objection at 3:52pm.