

ConnectALL | Consultation Agenda

Date: April 20, 2023

Time: 1pm – 4pm

Location: Onondaga Community College

Participants:

- Anthony Giacobbe, Director, Seneca Energy & Telecommunications
- Allyson Mitchell, General Manager, Mohawk Networks, LLC
- Jason Hall, Tribal Broadband Projects Manager, Mohawk Networks, LLC
- Joshua Breitbart, Senior Vice President, ConnectALL, Empire State Development
- Tanaya Srini, Senior Director of Digital Equity, ConnectALL, Empire State Development
- Rose Anello, Director of Outreach, ConnectALL, Empire State Development
- Rebecca Seewald, Broadband Program Specialist, National Telecommunications and Information Administration
- Jodia Vanel, Federal Program Officer, National Telecommunications and Information Administration

1) Opening Remarks & Introductions

- Meeting goals and overview (Joshua Breitbart, ConnectALL)
- Participant Introductions
- Welcome from Rebecca Seewald, NTIA

2) Overview of the BEAD, Digital Equity Act, and Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program

- Brief overview of ConnectALL Digital Equity and BEAD planning (J. Breitbart)
- Overview of Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (R. Seewald)

3) Discussion: Seneca Nation of Indians and Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe Perspectives on Broadband Needs and Barriers to Digital Equity (Tanaya Srini, ConnectALL)

4) Discussion: Strategies for Ongoing Coordination and Support from New York State ConnectALL Office (T. Srini)

5) Feedback and Next Steps (J. Breitbart)

Tribal Government Formal Consultation | Summary Notes

Introduction

On April 20, 2023, the ConnectALL Office hosted a consultation with representatives of the Seneca Nation (SNI) by way of Seneca Energy & Telecommunications and the Saint Regis Mohawk (SRM) Tribe by way of Mohawk Networks, LLC.

Participants

- Anthony Giacobbe, Director, Seneca Energy & Telecommunications
- Allyson Mitchell, General Manager, Mohawk Networks, LLC
- Jason Hall, Tribal Broadband Projects Manager, Mohawk Networks, LLC

CAO

- Joshua Breitbart, Senior Vice President, ConnectALL, Empire State Development
- Tanaya Srini, Senior Director of Digital Equity, ConnectALL, Empire State Development
- Rose Anello, Director of Outreach, ConnectALL, Empire State Development

NTIA

- Rebecca Seewald, Broadband Program Specialist, National Telecommunications and Information Administration
- Jodia Vanel, Federal Program Officer, National Telecommunications and Information Administration

Summary Notes

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mohawk Networks

Mohawk Networks (MN) is the Internet Service provider affiliated with the **Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe (SRM)**. MN began as a Tribal Government-run ISP because other ISPs were not serving the territory. The ISP began as an open-access network but did not succeed in drawing in tenants. At present, MN serves 1,500 homes on SRM territory and 200 homes off-territory. MN felt broadband infrastructure needs across the Nations within New York State are significant and would need to be addressed before other digital equity concerns. MN is not looking to expand their network at this time, but rather to strengthen their core service.

Seneca Energy & Telecommunications

Seneca Nation of Indians (SNI) does not have a Nation-affiliated internet service provider. In the future, **Seneca Energy & Telecommunications (SET)** would like to be able to provide service for SNI citizens, however, becoming an ISP is not a near-term plan. SNI formerly had free Wi-Fi service of 2 Mbps up and down, however the system was unreliable and was interrupted in the spring, summer and fall by leafy trees. The free system is being replaced with fiber. SNI Cattaraugus Territory: 600 members are connected out of 1,200 with fiber, but 25 homes are using the 2.5 GHz spectrum license from FCC. All connections are within the reservation. SET has a tower that can bounce off of DFT Communications towers. Allegany Territory in the Salamanca area along Interstate 86 has more fiber than the Cattaraugus Territory (Territories do not align with the county boundaries of the same name). Navigating the State park has been a topographical challenge in building out infrastructure.

GRANTS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Mohawk Networks

Past and Present Partnerships and Grants

MN received an award from Empire State Development's Broadband Program

Office (BPO) for Lewis County. The amount awarded was a fraction of the real cost, but MN hoped to build out the network and get enough subscribers to achieve sustainability and address unfunded costs. BPO did not disburse any of the awarded funds. Lewis County has given grants to other ISPs to expand into SRM territory. MN has submitted a proposal to the NTIA Digital Equity Tribal program and ReConnect Round 4 and has won a CPF grant, for which they haven't yet received funds. MN lost ReConnect Round 3.

MN would like to work with DANC to bring fiber to poles and then MN would bring fiber to the home. MN has worked with DANC successfully before. DANC worked with National Grid to apply for a middle-mile grant. This partnership would allow MN to reduce their fiber build-out should they win funding in ReConnect Round 4.

Challenges

MN is spending a large amount of time applying for federal grants from different agencies. The work is duplicative, and MN's resources are limited. Two staff are charged with applying for these major grants, among many other responsibilities. MN does not have staff whose sole responsibility is grant writing, and SRM has more resources than other tribes. CAO needs to be aware of resource constraints among Nations that may not have capacity to go after RFPs. SRM hopes that distinct federal grants, and even NTIA processes, can be streamlined.

Outstanding Questions

How can SRM ensure they are not duplicating/working at cross purposes with ConnectALL's Digital Equity Plan and NTIA grant programs targeted to Tribal Nations for digital equity?

Seneca Energy & Telecommunications

Past and Present Partnerships and Grants

SNI invested ~\$5M and received \$4.3M in USDA grant funding to construct 52 miles of fiber. DFT Communication covers half of the Cattaraugus Territory, supported through the USDA award. SET won an award through ReConnect 1. SET also applied for an NTIA grant, proposing to bounce the signal of the DFT tower.

Challenges

SET would like to build redundancy to bring final 25 homes (still using 2.5 GHz spectrum license from the FCC) with outdated service onto the fiber system, but most grants will not cover redundancy even when service options are poor. Served

and unserved classifications do not get at quality of service.

SET is required to meet stringent reporting requirements over the 20 years following the ReConnect 1 award. These reporting requirements are onerous and challenging for organizations with limited resources and capacity. SET believes they should be scaled back.

SET faced challenges in the ReConnect 1 process that came from not being a formal ISP. The utility had to use ReConnect contractors for construction when the contractor selected by SET was declined. Getting USDA approval for SET to be able to contract with DFT Communications, a small local provider, was also difficult.

In past federal and NYS broadband infrastructure grant programs, SNI has been frustrated by a lack of consultation from ISPs awarded funding by NYS to serve the Nation's territory. Armstrong was awarded a grant from BPO and HughesNet received awards to work on SNI territory as well. Armstrong started building without outreach to and collaboration with the Nation. SNI was never contacted by BPO in this process, and only worked with Armstrong to provide access to the right of way. The Nation does not want to see this repeated with CAO. This dynamic has not been present in work with DFT where SNI has been driving the project.

MAKE-READY

Mohawk Networks

Challenges

Make-ready is onerous and expensive. MN's experience with make-ready has been consistent between pole owners including National Grid, Verizon, and Messina Electric, although communication was easier with Messina as it is a smaller more local organization. Pole replacement is expensive. National Grid conducted a surprise audit 2 years ago, for which MN had to pay, of poles where MN attached. Because the poles are old, MN will be responsible for replacement fees, ongoing maintenance fees in addition to the costs for pole attachment during the initial build-out.

Seneca Energy & Telecommunications

Challenges

Make-ready is onerous and expensive. During the DFT project's fiber build out, 30%

of all poles needed to be replaced which cost \$3.5M: ~\$3M to Verizon and ~\$0.5M to National Grid. The poles were old and in very poor shape before DFT's attachment, but SET was responsible for the costs. The original project cost estimate was ~\$34K per mile, but the final project cost \$67K per mile, totaling ~\$10M largely due to pole replacement costs that amounted to 35% of the total project cost. Armstrong avoided similar costs for its BPO/New NY Broadband grant to serve the Seneca Nation's Allegany Territory by challenging National Grid at the Public Service Commission. That process took over a year. SET did not have time for such a delay during the pandemic and chose not to fight this cost.

SET is applying for a ~\$3.5M supplemental USDA grant to cover cost overage. SET has heard that they may be awarded \$2.7M of the ~\$3.5M requested, but this has not been formally confirmed.

SUSTAINABILITY

Mohawk Networks

Growth

MN is planning for short- and long-term sustainability and would like to be competitive with other ISPs. In rural territories, the customer pool is limited, and MN will have to expand beyond the territory to grow. MN is a certified small business and is moving into government contracting. MN needs to build sustainable operations so that the SRM Tribe has guaranteed and reliable service. Technology and needs evolve quickly, and MN wants to be confident that they have the resources to address aging equipment and new customer needs.

MN would like to serve Nation citizens who have moved beyond the territory because of a housing shortage. Allyson left her community for 20 years to find career opportunities beyond the Territory. She would like SRM citizens to stay and not have to leave to succeed. There is a generation of new workforce who can stay and work remotely for non-tribal companies if internet service is available and reliable.

Challenges

When adoption rates increased during the pandemic, MN faced the following Challenges:

- Building out infrastructure. It was incredibly expensive to rebuild the core network for speed, reliability, and redundancy. MN did not have resources to

build and replace aging tech equipment.

- Keeping citizens connected during bad weather.
- Funding continual operations. Operations are expensive, and MN noted that it will be important to build operating expenses into future grant proposals.

ADOPTION AND AFFORDABILITY

Mohawk Networks

MN has 400 subscribers, about 25% of whom participate in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). 20% of the Nation's citizens do not want the internet. This includes older adults and those who do not have the financial means to subscribe. Many citizens encounter difficulty signing up for the ACP. MN pays a significant amount for subscribers to access their data centers - Cogent and FirstLight (in Plattsburgh). While they have an excellent relationship with DANC, its service is also expensive.

Seneca Energy & Telecommunications

50% of SNI have adopted service, leaving 600 households yet to be connected.

DEVICES AND DIGITAL LITERACY

Mohawk Networks

Telehealth

Limited telehealth access is due to both a lack of health care professionals to provide telehealth and a lack of connectivity and devices among MN citizens. MN has had difficulty accessing the USDA equipment grant to support telehealth. The nation will need grants for both programmatic assistance and equipment to improve access to telehealth. In the original MN fiber network, bringing access to the SRM clinic was the focus. It had capacity for 100 Mbps but has gone unused for 5 years and the clinic leadership did not adopt the service.

Digital Literacy

MN's front desk serves as a digital navigator and tech assistant for the Nation's citizens and especially with its senior centers. Older adults need more support for digital literacy.

Seneca Energy & Telecommunications

Device Access

Device access is a barrier to connectivity. SNI lost a USDA grant to build out a computer lab and distance learning space, in part because it required a letter from the Governor which they did not have. SNI would like to create a central location where people who are not connected to fiber can go to access the internet. SNI's early childhood learning center in Cattaraugus Territory and the library in Allegany Territory are potential spaces for this program.

Telehealth

SNI's Community Health Clinic has connectivity through Windstream, however not many citizens are taking advantage of telehealth because they lack connectivity and/or devices. As more citizens are connected, SNI is hoping telehealth will be more utilized.

Aging Adults

Programs are available at senior centers with DFT to help seniors navigate the internet and devices.

SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

Mohawk Networks

Computer Centers

Post-pandemic, MN has had limited resources to encourage citizens to adopt broadband. Because MN is an ISP, they could not apply for the ACP Outreach grant even though they are running digital literacy and navigation services. MN received NTIA's Broadband Infrastructure Program (BIP) Broadband Technologies Opportunity Program (BTOP) grants at the same time. Through these grants, MN designed five computer centers at the library, senior center, economic resource center, business center/casino, and boys and girls club. In total, 200 computers were installed, and digital literacy classes were offered.

Program Challenges

Programming was funded through a 50/50 match grant with NTIA. The grant ran out and these centers are no longer operating, outside of several computers at the Boys and Girls Club and senior center. There are no longer staff to run these

programs. The library now has their own initiative related to computer access.

The computer centers were very effective and trained many citizens. MN worked with SUNY Potsdam and Anthony Betris on digital literacy training. MN saw adoption increase and youth utilize these training resources. To support digital equity, SRM would like computer centers and programming where people who do not have access can use the internet.

Outstanding Questions

Digital Literacy is needed – will the state develop a statewide curriculum?

Seneca Energy & Telecommunications

SNI needs more robust digital literacy programs.

CYBERSECURITY

Mohawk Networks

Cybersecurity programs in MN have increased over the past decade. MN pays for penetration testing and protection. This \$15K cost is insurance against greater loss that could come from an attack.

Seneca Energy & Telecommunications

SET does not have to worry about penetration testing costs as DFT covers these operating expenses. These costs are among the reason SNI does not feel they have the present capacity to form an ISP.

WORKFORCE/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mohawk Networks

MN has a requirement in all contracts to train SRM workforce. A decade out, they have had success in building a broadband workforce within the community. If MN did not require this, contractors may have bypassed citizens for jobs.

MN has built a team of citizens who are well trained and connected to the

community. This helps the team rapidly address outages and understand contexts. Allyson is a Spectrum customer, lives off-territory, and sees the difference in customer service.

Workforce development efforts continue today:

- Native preference hiring policies at MN
- 80% of MN's core team are SRM citizens
- Limited workforce attrition
- MN invests in continuing education for employees and assists in acquiring certifications; MN continues to upskill and includes this cost within operating expenses
- Tribal Broadband Boot Camp will be in MN this summer on July 31st; SNI to attend

Seneca Energy & Telecommunications

SET has had DFT train several staff. They have 2 staff they would like to train further. While not in the short-term plan, in the future, SET would like to be an independent ISP to create a sovereign broadband network for the Nation.