

Broadband Advisory Committee

Final Report to Selectman's Office

November 21, 2023

At the last regular meeting of the Broadband Advisory Committee, it was concluded that the primary goals and objectives of the committee had been achieved and that the need for an official Town committee was no longer necessary. As a result, it was unanimously agreed to recommend to the Selectman's office to dissolve the committee upon submission of a final report.

Background network analysis and establishing goals

The Broadband Advisory Committee was formed in late 2021 with an objective to educate, investigate and advocate for the residents of Goshen as a subcommittee of the Board of Selectmen. This need emanated from substantial challenges many residents and students faced during the pandemic and increased needs for broadband services in our area. The primary objective of the committee was to examine our existing infrastructure, examine options to pursue competing municipally owned fiber networks, engage with existing service providers (i.e. Optimum (via parent company AlticeUSA) and Frontier (former owner of SNET/AT&T network) and help residents navigate through the coming end to the traditional cable bundle. The committee also sought to secure funding and complete installation of new broadband and WiFi access throughout the Camp Coch set of buildings and pavilion.

The committee initially produced substantial materials and engaged with independent 3rd parties regarding the installation of new fiber networks and developed a full understanding of state and federal subsidy programs, or the lack thereof. At the same time, the committee became aware of efforts in some adjoining towns and engaged with Optimum and Frontier to learn of their efforts, given the increasing demand for broadband and fiber throughout Connecticut. In early 2022, Optimum announced plans for a substantial strategic investment, to install a new fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) network alongside its existing coaxial network, throughout the eight (8) towns it currently served in Litchfield county, including Goshen. This was a substantial strategic announcement surprised many but would clearly benefit everyone in the area.

The launch of Optimum Fiber in Goshen

While there have been many changes over the past two years, Optimum (AlticeUSA) has largely worked to complete its construction, albeit delayed by a group of factors. After a much slower start than anticipated, the company dispatched teams and teams of subcontractors to string new fiber throughout the area and digging/laying new conduit lines from which fiber was pulled throughout our various neighborhoods. This largely got started in Goshen in early 2023 and was very evident through this past summer and fall, with initial fiber connects taking place in September 2023.

While we are in a much better place from the standpoint of broadband access and fiber development especially relative to other nearby towns, things have clearly not gone as planned with many complications with construction and new resident connections. Optimum as a company has gone through substantial turmoil as it took on this substantial capital expenditure plan while at the same time, replacing its CEO and much of the senior management team. There were concerns the strategy might change, but it seems they were too far invested to turn back. Interest rates rose, inflation spiked and naturally everything has proven to cost more than they anticipated.

Buyer beware – it's a headache to get started....but ultimately better

The committee has continued to respond to inquiries to problems and seek out answers within Optimum in advance of the launch of the product. However, now customers should rely on the www.optimum.com website to see if their address is fiber eligible before calling for new service. Also, customers need to be aware that it can be an arduous process to get that final connection especially if your property is connected via underground conduit. The company has suffered from poor internal communications, despite their best efforts, forcing repeated visits and wasted time to swap out coaxial boxes and getting new fiber connections via Optical Network Terminals (ONT).

Understanding the Fiber offering and changing TV landscape

Customers also need to be aware of a few differences with the new service:

- a) Fiber service is superior to traditional copper coaxial that has been offered in the past. This is due to the fact that overall bandwidth capacity is substantially greater, regardless of what you pay for and bandwidth is symmetrical meaning, the speed you upload is the same as the speed you download, making video communications far superior.
- b) Fiber service will be more expensive, initially from reduced teaser rates/marketing and over time via trimming lower bandwidth offerings. The new management team has already referenced this somewhat both via trimming old HFC network offerings (i.e. pushing people up to higher bandwidths) and few gift cards being offered to lower customer acquisition costs.
- c) TV service in the home will no longer use coaxial cables, instead receiving their transmission wirelessly from new WiFi routers provided by Optimum at the time of installation. This will be both good and bad for some homeowners depending on the size of your home, interest to move TVs around and/or having just done wiring.
- d) Streaming bundles will soon be the norm as linear TV as we knew it is slowly phased out. Former cable companies will soon only be broadband suppliers and packagers of streaming services (i.e. Netflix, Disney+, MAX, Paramount+, AppleTV+, Discovery+, Sling, etc.). Whether this is good or bad depends on the type of customer you were but it doesn't make things easier as we all deal with usernames, passwords on multiple devices.

Looking forward What should customers expect today? Customers need to be diligent about what they pay for, what they consume, and reach out to neighbors and friends to compare offers and options. Hopefully, the days of \$200/mo cable bills will disappear as few boxes need to be rented, folks stop paying for hundreds of channels they never watch, and some people can get by just with their wireless phone company if they're in a part of town with a good cell signal and an unlimited plan. Finally, while new fiber companies seek to convince everyone they need more bandwidth, the fact remains that 300Mbps of symmetrical fiber service is more than enough to accommodate 90% of homes with families and some remote work. The reliability of the network will be substantially greater past experience, buffering should decline dramatically, most noticeably during peak evening hours and ultimately should be a better overall experience. Our suggestion remains to seek out new customer pricing by calling customer retention at **877-936-4778** to avoid installation fees, seek out the otherwise removed 300Mbps bandwidth tier and get the best rates.

Get Optimum Fiber Internet starting at \$30/mo.

\$25 /mo.
For 1 yr. w/Auto Pay & Paperless Bill.¹

EXCLUSIVE ONLINE OFFER

Check availability **Details** ⓘ

Not available in all areas. Wired connection. WiFi speeds may vary.

- + Save nearly \$300/yr. vs. Verizon.¹
- + No hidden fees
- + Equipment included¹

Get FREE installation with online orders

B.F.D. BLACK FRIDAY DEAL

Limited Time Offer

Equipment included

No annual contract

Take note, it does seem Optimum has reintroduced some more competitive fiber offerings for new customers, especially for Black Friday, suggesting rates as low as \$25/mo with autopay and paperless billing, including free installation/equipment. Online ordering only. Please read the fine print.

Fiber network construction has stalled seasonally and not all streets have been connected but we anticipate further expansion to take place in 2024 but do not yet have definitive details on this. Similarly, Frontier had deferred their Goshen construction plans in July after learning about the aggressiveness of the Optimum construction in our area, deferring their program also to 2024/2025. We will see if this actually comes to pass given higher construction costs and increased competitiveness. The rural demographics of the Northwest corner of Connecticut do not help this dynamic (meaning its possible they reconsider this program entirely without state support).

CampCoch broadband connection and WiFi installation nearly complete – With support from the Selectmen, Recreation and Finance committees, Gary Stango generously dedicated his professional time and helped purchase and install equipment necessary to support new WiFi service at the main building and hi-gain antenna to connect the nursing station and eventually the pavilion in 2024. These services will greatly expand the functionality and use of the CampCoch building, rec department and future meetings for the Goshen Land Trust and other community organizations hoping to use the meeting room. It has also greatly improved the use of security cameras which struggled with the legacy Frontier DSL copper phone service.

What help will be available? Looking forward, each of the members of the BAC remain committed to advocating for Goshen and area residents with Optimum and are reachable should any residents have questions or concerns. However, the formality of a town committee is simply no longer needed as most customer issues, questions can be handled directly by the customer service staff at Optimum or any of the wireless service providers. Should you have any questions or need additional support, don't hesitate contacting the First Selectman's office to put you in touch with one of the committee members.

Don't forget about the **Affordable Connectivity Program** for eligible low-income residents. Paperwork related to this federal support program is available at the town hall and is applicable for wireless and regular phone service. If folks reading this are aware of anyone on food stamps or generally qualify for low income programs, please encourage them to look into this subsidized program to possibly qualify for heavily discounted rates, including possible free broadband internet access.