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In 2019, Chesterfield was the first. In 2020 five more followed: Dublin, Harrisville, Rindge, Walpole, and Westmoreland. This year, sixteen New Hampshire communities are poised to enter into public-private partnerships to expand broadband access and modernize infrastructure: Charlestown, Fitzwilliam, Gilsum, Goshen, Greenfield, Jaffrey, Langdon, Marlborough, Marlow, Peterborough, Roxbury, Salisbury, Sullivan, Temple, Troy, and Unity. In total, the projects amount to well over $40 million in investment. What do these communities have in common? They have agreed that public-private partnerships are an effective way to address their broadband needs. In each case, they’ve used a unique combination of municipal bonding combined with a monthly fee on subscribers to make payments on the bond. The majority of communities this year chose to partner with Consolidated Communications. “Public-private partnerships are cost effective, mutually beneficial and ensure individuals, families and small businesses have access to critical services,” said Jeff McIver, consumer product manager at Consolidated Communications. “At Consolidated, our willingness to work directly with local towns and their leaders to upgrade and improve their broadband service allows us to deliver exactly what communities need and want with minimal to no impact on taxes.” But other providers, especially ones with some presence in a community are ready to improve service as funding comes available – be it through municipal bonds, federal programs or stimulus funding.

The other notable fact about municipal broadband infrastructure improvement proposals this year is that there is a continued focus in Southwest New Hampshire. Factors at play are numerous: longstanding disparities in service quality compared to other parts of the State (see online map of data from Measurement Lab at arcgis.is/X0W5C); changes to State legislation clarifying the use of general obligation bonds for broadband infrastructure; and willingness on behalf of the region’s largest provider and others to modernize. However, the biggest reason for this success story in Southwest NH are the many communities and volunteers who have made it possible. Municipal staff and volunteers follow a rigorous public process involving research, education, law, financing, and more. And they continue to lead their communities beyond implementation.

The Southwest Region Planning Commission (SWRPC) has helped with this process going back to the adoption of the region’s first ever Broadband Plan in 2015 (available at swrpc.org/broadband/plan). In many ways this process helped to lay the foundation for the broadband improvements we see happening
today. And many of those involved in this work have done so by assisting neighboring communities and as participants of the Monadnock Broadband Group, an informal coalition of municipal officials, practitioners and other stakeholders with interest in understanding and coordinating relative to broadband issues in Southwest NH. Over the years, conversations have ranged from state and federal legislative updates and exploring regional models in broadband improvement - everything from Vermont’s communication union districts and planning grants to the FCC’s Rural Digital Opportunity Fund to New Hampshire’s infrastructure bonding process and “The Chesterfield Model.” “We have appreciated the opportunity to act as convener and facilitator of meaningful dialog related to broadband issues and information. We are thrilled to see the real and tangible progress and results of the many partners that made this possible,” said Henry Underwood, GIS Specialist/Planner at SWRPC.

Among the most notable accomplishments in the last year has been the development of the Monadnock Region Broadband Implementation Guide (available at swrpc.org/broadband/resources) – a playbook for communities seeking better internet service. The guide outlines a step-by-step process and focuses on the public private partnership first used by the Town of Chesterfield in 2018. “The Guide synthesizes the knowledge and experience of local broadband champions,” said Todd Horner, Planner at SWRPC. “The Monadnock Region has benefited from the efforts of volunteers who have acted as trailblazers on this issue. The Guide aims to document those efforts so that other communities don’t need to reinvent the wheel.”

SWRPC will continue to be a resource by continuing to support the region’s communities through the Monadnock Broadband Group as well as other avenues. SWRPC’s ongoing ability to serve in this capacity has been made possible in part through support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development and the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

To receive meeting announcements for Monadnock Broadband Group meetings, please write to Henry Underwood at hunderwood@swrpc.org or Todd Horner at thorner@swrpc.org (or call 603-357-0557). SWRPC’s broadband planning resources are available at swrpc.org/broadband.