

## **NEK Broadband w/Senator Welch – 10/30/24**

### **\$2.8M Community Connect**

Good afternoon, and thank you Christa, Tonya and all of the NEK Broadband folks for hosting this wonderful event and inviting us here to beautiful Island Pond. Our special appreciation goes to Michael Nahmias and others from the town of Groton, a community we celebrate today, who got the job done and made this day happen.

And of course to our esteemed congressional delegation, without whose leadership and initiative and support USDA funding would have a hard time finding its way to the people and places who need it most, I reserve a sincere and solemn appreciation for your partnership.

My name is Sarah Waring, State Director for USDA Rural Development in Vermont and New Hampshire, and lastly I want to THANK YOU all for being here to help us celebrate this occasion with our Northeast Kingdom friends.

Senator Welch, you have been the tip of the spear on this issue, fighting hard for Vermonters in every town to have reliable, high-speed internet access. You have been on the ground with us, ever interested, eager to listen, and always inquisitive. We met with you at the Fairbanks Museum in March of last year with VCBB and CUD leaders, and it was a productive, insightful discussion about how to improve funding access for broadband infrastructure.

Taking some of what you learned from that day and integrating it into a vast reserve of industry knowledge you already possessed, you then hosted Christa in Washington, D.C., May of last year, so she could testify in front of Congress as to the lengths she had to go to get the historic \$17.4 million ReConnect grant application completed. In a powerful moment, she held up a novel-length document so those gathered could see what the application looked like, and what it takes to fill it out.

It takes a person, by the way, like Christa, who is patient, persistent and razor sharp. Admittedly, this is not a game for everyone, and we talk about it in our office quite a bit; how many of the projects we encounter, especially the tough ones with complex applications, have a tireless champion or two at the helm. Someone who simply won't quit, because getting a grant or loan application completed can make you want to quit. Not just quit the application but quit everything.

Senator, again, you've proven that you understand this at the ground level, and we know how hard you're working to make it easier for more people, more towns and CUDs, to access and fund broadband infrastructure. So thank you for not quitting either. We also know that lack of broadband access matters more and more, every day, and puts more and more rural residents who don't have it at a disadvantage. I'm not sure about you, but the lessons COVID taught me have stuck. When I can chip back away at the legacy of the pandemic, at the hard layer of isolation it trapped us in, I'm eager to do

so. I remember seeing kids attending school in their cars outside the local library, or parked for hours on the street outside retail stores. Desperate families without reliable service, wondering about the fate of loved ones quarantined in hospitals. Folks with mobility issues and without solid signals unable to get prescriptions filled.

What COVID taught me, among other things, and I believe this to my core, is that high speed internet isn't a luxury. It's a necessity. The speed of information dictates business growth. It dictates student performance, and it also, now more than ever, allows for rural healthcare to be provided in an equitable way. No one, and I mean no one, should be without the internet and without high-speed access, unless they choose that lifestyle. And again, after trying to fill out a ReConnect application, that may be the way to go. The Community Connect grant we're also here to celebrate gives Groton more than \$2.8 million to help build out its broadband network and provide its residents with high-speed internet, giving them access to crucial goods, services and connection with the online community. Christa tells me that Michael Gaiss, who is not here, and you Grotonites are a formidable bunch who wouldn't be denied, and I want you to know how much I admire and respect your efforts to make life better for your neighbors. Today is a celebration of partnership, innovation and perseverance, and these qualities are essential Vermont virtues.

Many of us know each other here, and know each other rather well. It's not like that in other states; this friendly collaboration and celebration of each other's success is not the status quo. And now, especially with life-changing environmental disasters, we don't have the luxury of competing with each other or refusing to join forces. We live in a place where our neighbors are our greatest and most powerful resource, and that's where funding like this does its best and most noble work.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today, and for the opportunity to make actual fiber!

[Handoff]