

January 21, 2021

DRAFT

From: Russell Senior, Municipal Broadband PDX  
To: Portland Public Schools Leadership  
Subject: Request for Endorsement of a Multnomah County budget item

Telecommunications is fundamental to our modern society. This has been shown undeniably during our current pandemic. For decades, in Portland and most places in the United States, the infrastructure that enables access to telecommunication has been in the hands of a few for-profit corporations. Telecommunications policy, which is set primarily at the federal level by the US Congress and the Federal Communications Commission, has left control of that infrastructure at the discretion of the investors and owners of that infrastructure. Since the owners have an interest in maximizing their economic returns, and because of the substantial capital costs of building competing infrastructure, choices remain extremely limited and prices and terms on provision of service are not disciplined by viable alternatives.

The expense of for-profit internet access has been a significant barrier to many families with children in schools. Before the pandemic, there was a kind of safety net through access at school and public libraries. We have seen acutely during the pandemic what happens when those safety nets are abruptly unavailable. The programs that for-profit providers have offered are quite limited and only partially solve a problem the providers have themselves created.

Through two decades of bipartisan federal neglect of the public interest, it has become clear that the most effective way to solve this problem is by direct public ownership of telecommunications infrastructure so that policy and prices can center users. Hundreds of communities around the country have done this successfully<sup>1</sup>, including several here in Oregon<sup>2</sup>.

In 2018, our campaign known as Municipal Broadband PDX asked local jurisdictions to fund an economic feasibility study of a publicly-owned optical fiber network. Multnomah County led off, budgeting \$150,000, contingent on funding partners. By October 2019, a consortium of five cities (Fairview, Gresham, Portland, Troutdale, and Wood Village) had joined an intergovernmental agreement led by Multnomah County and kicked off the feasibility study. In October 2020, the feasibility study was released to the public<sup>3</sup>.

The next step is to convene local stakeholders, including schools, small businesses and residents, to formulate one or more coherent concrete proposals to put in front of elected representatives and, potentially, voters. Municipal Broadband PDX has begun discussions with Multnomah County to support funding for a project manager position in the upcoming budget year to manage that process.

We are asking Portland Public Schools board members, individually and/or in concert, to communicate with the Multnomah County Chair's office to endorse the budget allocation for the project manager. As the Chair's budget is being developed now, such an endorsement as soon as possible will have the most efficacy.

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1 <https://muninetworks.org/communitymap>

2 <https://www.ci.sandy.or.us/sandynet>, <https://www.minetfiber.com/about>, and rolling out now: <https://www.hillsboro-oregon.gov/services/hilight>

3 <https://multco.us/file/92615/download>