The Island Institute

Broadband Plan for Maine's Off-Shore Islands

While the State of Maine as a whole has many areas that are facing broadband connectivity challenges, its off-shore inhabited islands in the Gulf of Maine are a particularly underserved group due to their remote geography and low population density. Recognizing the potential benefits of broadband to many aspects of island life, in 2015 The Island Institute engaged Tilson to provide a feasibility study for 13 of Maine's year-round inhabited island communities. The Institute is a privately funded nonprofit dedicated to sustaining Maine's island and remote coastal communities.

The Island Institute charged Tilson with examining each island's unmet broadband needs, and to outline several solutions to address some or all of the identified shortfalls on each island. An important part of the study was to deliver the information in a format usable for each community, which included a written report and active participation in a conference attended by all 13 island communities.

Tilson conducted a kickoff and requirements definition meeting in order to understand the broadband needs, goals, and questions of each community. Based on these meetings, Tilson developed a survey of residents and businesses across communities to measure broadband subscribership, satisfaction and aspirations. The survey was randomized in order to capture representative cross sections of the communities, and the results were differentiated between types of users, e.g. year-round and seasonal, in an effort to better understand the dynamics of public support.

Tilson validated the current state of broadband access by conducting a telecom asset inventory and outreach to existing service providers. Lastly, Tilson developed several high level solutions and accompanying capital cost estimates to address some or all of each community's unmet broadband needs. These solutions leveraged existing assets where possible, and varied in technology, geographic coverage and speed. They included fiber, wireless, and DSL-based solutions.

Tilson composed a report with both comprehensive information on broadband and specific content to each island community outlining its options in taking an active role in future broadband planning. Tilson also participated in a two-day conference with key stakeholders from each island. The report and video recordings of part of this conference can be viewed at the Institute's website, www.islandinstitute.org, or directly via http://goo.gl/k2oqZA.

In addition to providing cost and service availability estimates for various technological solutions, Tilson identified opportunities for regional collaboration between the islands. Armed with the information outlined in Tilson's report, several of the islands have formed committees to pursue solutions proposed in the report. Their activities include working with incumbent providers to utilize Universal Service Funds

to improve existing service; leveraging both the Maine School and Library Fund and the federal E-Rate program to establish or improve symmetrical, high speed service, and conducting feasibility studies on the operating model of a FTTP network.