

# Admin committee seeks advisers for potential broadband project

By Kelly Holm

OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

In February, the Oneida County board of supervisors voted to create a public-private partnership with Hilbert Communications — of which Bug Tussel Wireless, the company that recently

purchased Northwoods Connect, is a subsidiary — marking the latest step toward a countywide broadband expansion opportunity.

The expansion, which would be undertaken through Bug Tussel, would bring 225 miles of middle mile fiber and six new

cell towers to the county, and would be funded largely through a conduit financing arrangement with a bond created by Fond du Lac County. Oneida is currently one of eight counties in talks with Bug Tussel to participate in the project.

“It’s another chunk of fiber that goes directly to homes. There’s six cell towers that will also have wireless capabilities,” Bug Tussel representative Mitch Olson told the county administration committee May 19. “The towers we (Bug Tussel) build, at the most basic level, are more robust than the towers that Northwoods (Connect) built, because of our relationship with the cellular carriers.”

The project has a 30-year lifespan, unlike the original bonds from when Fond du Lac County initiated the funding program in 2012, which were for 10 years, Olson said.

“The biggest reason for 30 (years) is to keep the debt service at a manageable level, so that we can keep our broadband subscription low,” he continued. “The technology that does get outlived in this program is the electronics that you hook into the fiber, but upgrades to those electronics are baked into our financial model.”

It is estimated that

the project could significantly increase annual seasonal spending due to improved broadband access, and would provide the county more than \$100,000 annually in right of way and basis points fees.

As for the project’s costs, the county “would not have any cash outlay other than (providing) ARPA dollars to lower the bond guarantee amount and provide consulting resources,” according to a PowerPoint made by the Oneida County Economic Development Corporation. Bond guarantees are to be determined.

“Although the bonds are issued in a group, each County’s obligation is limited to the money spent in the County, which is that County’s pro-rata share of the bonds,” reads a Frequently Asked Questions document prepared by Bug Tussel. “Hilbert Communications is the primary guarantor on all the debt. Any default puts the entire company on the line, so the Oneida County project could not be selectively defaulted.”

## Outside consulting services

Committee members also discussed the prospect of bringing in an external technology consultant and independent financial advisor in addition to bond counsel, and emergency services department head Jake Simkins suggested retired chief deputy John Sweeney as a contender for the former position.

Committee chair Billy Fried made a successful motion to direct finance director Tina Smigelski, corporation counsel Mike Fugel and ITS director Jason Rhodes to put together resolutions for securing these positions to be presented at the next county board meeting.

“We want to make the right decisions on technology, that’s why we were looking at a consultant,” Fried said. “We want to know what we’re exposing ourselves to financially, and where our liabilities are.”

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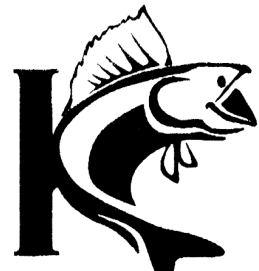
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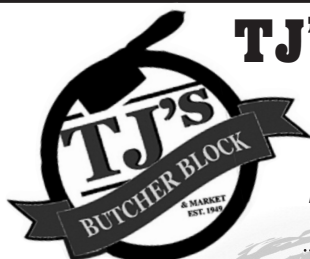
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