

Date: May 30, 2008

To: Blandin Strategy Board

From: Bill Coleman

RE: Cook County Open Access Feasibility Fund

Cook County has applied for \$35,000 in funding through the Open Access Feasibility Fund program to conduct a feasibility study for a countywide broadband network.

Cook County is the applicant and the feasibility study will cover the entire county. The application is for \$35,000 from Blandin to be matched with \$35,000 of local funds. A combination of funders will provide the local match – Cook County \$15,000; Arrowhead Electric Cooperative \$10,000, Boreal Access ISP \$10,000. In addition, each will be providing some in-kind support services for this study. They have a steering committee that includes the funders, plus some additional community members. Commitment letters from Boreal and Arrowhead are attached. The county letter will be available soon.

An RFP has not been developed yet; I will be providing some assistance to them through Blandin Community Broadband Resources as they develop this RFP.

While the goal is FTTP throughout the county, the planning team recognizes that an incremental approach involving a variety of technologies will most likely be required.

Cook County has been active in ensuring Internet access since the “beginning”, I believe going back to 1996 and the formation of Boreal Access, a cooperative. Over the years, they have worked to bring DSL to Grand Marais and then expanded that service along the shore to key resort areas, using both wired and wireless technologies. They have a public access wifi network in Grand Marais’ downtown area. Cook County was one of the pilot communities for the Get Broadband program and the MN Extension Service’s E-Commerce training programs.

Cook County has the highest per capita education levels of anywhere in Minnesota. While the county is quite large, population is clustered along the shore and the various trails leading from the lake.

There are both public and private telecommunications needs to be met and Cook County’s distance from higher education and level 1 health care centers, there is great opportunity to make significant use of advanced telecommunications.

A grant review committee of Gary Evans, Mike O’Connor and Eric Lampland reviewed and discussed the application. The committee recommends approval of this application to the Strategy Board (2-0, with Lampland abstaining) with the following conditions: 1) that the RFP be subject to review and approval by the grant review committee; 2) that the RFP make significant note of the following: a) the demographics and geography of the County that will make financial success a challenge and b) the use of wireless in the north woods will need to overcome significant technical challenges.