

Charles officials present broadband strategy update

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La Plata, MD - The effort to improve Internet service in Charles County is well underway. During their Tuesday, March 12 meeting the Charles Commissioners received an update from county government staff on the initiative strategy. Deputy County Administrator Deborah E. Hall introduced the board to several members of the Broadband Taskforce and outlined the group's agenda, along with Information Technology Chief Evelyn Jacobson.

The Broadband Taskforce is comprised of representatives from several county departments and one citizen member. The force has held three meetings and has broken out into committees. A web site that will allow citizens to track the taskforce's progress has been launched. A citizen survey will be developed and county government's Administration, Information Technology and Public Works departments will draft a "statement of work" as a project plan comes together. Hall said the taskforce plans to work with citizens to create "accurate maps" of Charles County's areas underserved by Internet services.

Jacobson said the taskforce is watching the progress of legislation in the Maryland General Assembly that could factor significantly in bolstering Charles County's Internet efficiency. The measure, Senate Bill (SB) 634, according to a legislative summary, would authorize "an electric cooperative to construct, maintain, or operate or allow others to construct, maintain, or operate conducting or communications facilities for telecommunications and broadband Internet services along, on, under, or across various types of property."

The taskforce is seeking grant funding from the state. County government will apply for a "broadband feasibility study grant" through the Governor's Office of Rural Broadband. "At some point, we are going to come to the commissioners for funding we will need to accomplish any of our goals," Hall said. When asked by Commissioners' President Reuben Collins [D] about funding specifics, Hall estimated the infrastructure component of the statement of work could cost around \$5 million.

"This [expanded, reliable Internet service] will help them [citizens] with education," said Commissioner Gilbert O. Bowling III [D-District 1], adding that he believed Charles County taxpayers would be supportive of such an expenditure.

The commissioners will receive another update from the Broadband Taskforce next month.

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