

The Cumberland Oxford Lakes Area Broadband Initiative (COLAB): Bringing High-Speed Internet to the Region

The Cumberland Oxford Lakes Area Broadband Initiative (COLAB) is a collaborative effort to bring reliable, high-speed internet access to the towns of Sebago, Raymond, Casco, Naples, and Standish in Maine. COLAB is a committee established by the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG), a regional organization that supports economic development and planning in the Greater Portland area. Established in 2021, COLAB aims to address the inadequate broadband infrastructure in the region by creating a transparent, inclusive, and professional process to gather requirements, build consensus among the towns, and ultimately select the best partner to implement a regional broadband network.

1. Community Engagement and Needs Assessment

Throughout 2021 and 2022, COLAB conducted surveys and held community meetings to gather input from residents and businesses about their internet needs and experiences. This feedback was used to shape the priorities and guide the development of the Request for Proposals (RFP).

2. Building Consensus and Developing the RFP

The COLAB committee worked to build consensus among the five member towns on the key requirements for the broadband network. Through meetings and discussions, a shared vision for the project was established, and essential elements were agreed upon for inclusion in the RFP.

The RFP, released in August 2022, was a comprehensive document that outlined the objectives, technical requirements, and evaluation criteria for the project. It provided potential bidders with a clear understanding of the needs and expectations while ensuring a fair and competitive selection process.

The RFP included the following key sections:

- **Introduction and Background:** This section provided an overview of COLAB, the member towns, and the project's goals and objectives. It emphasized the importance of reliable, high-speed internet access for economic development, education, healthcare, and quality of life in the region. The section also outlined the current state of broadband infrastructure in the member towns and the challenges faced by residents and businesses due to inadequate internet access.
- **Scope of Work:** In this section, the desired outcomes, technical requirements, and deliverables for the broadband network were detailed. This included specific requirements for network architecture, such as the use of fiber-optic technology, as well as the minimum speeds and performance standards for internet service offerings. The RFP also outlined the geographic area to be served, including the coverage goals for each member town, and any phasing considerations for the project's implementation.
- **Proposal Submission Requirements:** To ensure that the COLAB committee received comprehensive and comparable proposals, the RFP clearly outlined the format, content, and deadline for submitting proposals. This section specified the required elements of each proposal, such as the bidder's qualifications, technical approach, project timeline, pricing, and references. It also provided instructions for submitting questions and clarifications during the RFP process.
- **Evaluation Criteria:** To maintain a fair and objective selection process, the RFP detailed the factors that would be used to evaluate and score each proposal. This included criteria such as the proposer's experience and track record in deploying broadband networks, the technical feasibility and scalability of their proposed solution, the strength of their project management plan, and the overall cost-effectiveness of their proposal. The RFP also outlined the relative weightings of each evaluation factor and the process for negotiations and final selection.

- **Contract Terms and Conditions:** This section provided an overview of the anticipated contract structure, duration, and key terms and conditions that would govern the partnership between COLAB and the selected broadband provider. It addressed issues such as network ownership, maintenance responsibilities, service level agreements, and provisions for future network expansions or upgrades. The RFP also outlined the insurance requirements, performance bonds, and other legal considerations that bidders would need to address in their proposals.

The full RFP document is available on the GPCOG website:

<https://www.gpcog.org/DocumentCenter/View/2485/COLAB-RFP>

3. Evaluating Bidders and Selecting a Partner

After receiving proposals in response to the RFP, the COLAB committee evaluated each submission based on the established criteria. This process ensured the selection of a partner with the expertise, resources, and commitment to deliver the best broadband solution for the communities.

In September 2023, COLAB announced that Sebago Fiber had been chosen as the preferred partner. Sebago Fiber's proposal demonstrated a strong technical approach, an understanding of the region's needs, and a cost-effective plan to build and operate a high-speed fiber-optic network.

Moving Forward

With Sebago Fiber as the partner and a \$3.2 million grant secured by the Town of Sebago from the Maine Connectivity Authority, the implementation of the regional broadband network is set to begin. Sebago will lead the way, with construction expected to start in 2024 and the first connections operational by the end of that year.

An additional benefit of the COLAB initiative is the opportunity for municipal governments to fund dark fiber connections to their buildings at a discounted rate. By working together, the towns can optimize the broadband infrastructure for both public and municipal requirements. This will allow for the creation of high-speed links between all municipal locations, improving efficiency and communication for local government services.

Sebago Fiber's announcement of the partnership and project plans can be found on their website:

<https://www.sebagofiber.net/post/sebago-fiber-selected-as-preferred-isp-by-gpcog-colab-committee>

Sebago Fiber's announcement of the \$3.2 million grant awarded by the Maine Connectivity Authority to the Town of Sebago can be found here:

<https://www.sebagofiber.net/post/sebago-fiber-receives-state-grant-to-bring-reliable-internet-to-town-of-sebago>

Sebago Fibers FAQ section link can be found here:

<https://www.sebagofiber.net/faq>

As the Sebago project progresses, the other COLAB member towns will continue to seek funding opportunities and work with Sebago Fiber to develop their own implementation plans. The initiative aims to ensure that all communities benefit from the transformative project.

For more information or updates on the COLAB initiative, please contact your local town office. They will be able to provide you with the most current information and any relevant updates specific to your community.