



Educational Communications Board

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EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS BOARD MEETING

ECB Board Room
3319 West Beltline Highway
Madison, Wisconsin
July 17, 2020
9:30 A.M.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORT

Marta Bechtol, Executive Director

Working in the COVID World

ECB has stabilized telecommuting operations as our “new normal.” ECB staff members that were temporarily interchanged with the Department of Health Services, Division of Public Health for contact tracing have been returned. We appreciate their individual willingness to serve in this capacity during the height of the crisis. All ECB staff members are fully employed in their respective positions at this time.

David Cobb now permanently staffs the headquarters office, providing essential assistance to agency leadership and all employees in need of services and support while telecommuting. We are most grateful for the consistency and efficiency his presence at the Beltline ensures.

Given that we are able to function successfully with minimal onsite staffing, ECB will remain in our present operational mode for the health and safety of our employees when the state enters Badger Bounce Back Phase II.

State Budget Update

Due to the unforeseen costs of COVID, executive branch agencies were directed in late April to constrain their expenditures for the remainder of FY20 to the equivalent of a 5% lapse. By virtue of the size and/or mission of the agency, ECB was exempted from having to take such lapse.

Instructions for FY 21-23 Biennial Budget requests have now been delivered to agencies, which establishes our summer workload. Both capital and technical requests are due on September 15.

ECB appeared before the State Building Commission and the Governor in virtual meetings on May 20, 2020 to request \$2,392,600 in funding for new transmitters at WHRM-Wausau, WLEF-Park Falls and WHWC-Menomonie. The request was granted.

The old transmitters will be replaced with liquid-cooled units which are much more energy efficient than the legacy models. They will be capable of the NextGenTV standard (formerly known as ATSC 3), and will support the power increases authorized by the FCC’s one-time



limited signal expansion opportunity. In addition to expanding the statewide AMBER/Emergency Alert System (EAS) delivery network, these replacement upgrades will increase our statewide viewing audience by approximately 104,000 citizens.

Federal Budget Update

The agency received \$350,000 from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) in our CARES Act distribution at the end of April. These funds have served as an important bridge while readjusting our budget to account for the costs of long-term telecommuting.

Current and new requests in the following appropriations include:

Labor, Health and Human Services, Education

- \$ 175M Emergency funding for public broadcasters due to COVID
- \$ 515M Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a \$50M increase over current funding of \$465M
- \$ 20M Broadcast Interconnect, an ongoing appropriation
- \$ 30M Ready-to-Learn in the Department of Education (Every Student Succeeds Act), \$2.3M increase over current funding of \$27.7

Department of Homeland Security

- \$20M Next Generation Resilient Warning System grants, a new request

As CPB is forward-funded by two years, these increases would take effect in 2023.

Gene Purcell and I have recently held telephone meetings regarding these requests with the offices of Sen. Tammy Baldwin and Rep. Mark Pocan who both serve on their respective Appropriations Committees.

Advocacy Update

The 2020 state advocacy event held jointly with UW-Madison, the Friends of PBS Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin Public Radio Association was cancelled. We had originally intended to reschedule this event, but given current conditions it is more likely that advocacy efforts will remain “virtual” throughout the year.

Similarly, America’s Public Television Stations (APTS), public television’s advocacy organization, has already cancelled its 2021 Public Media Summit that would have been held next February. Interestingly, we have learned that social media is a preferred method for congressional advocacy right now in that it doesn’t require staffers to enter federal office buildings to retrieve mail or voice messages. Our internal Advocacy Team will be evaluating our outreach methods to determine how we can better utilize social media as part of our overall strategy.



Rural Broadband

The last few months have demonstrated the imperative for reliable broadband for education and business in Wisconsin. ECB continues to work with the Department of Public Instruction, the Public Services Commission, other state agencies and commercial service providers to identify opportunities and develop best practices to further broadband expansion in the state.

In May, ECB applied for two rural broadband Public Service Commission Grants out of the 2020 Universal Service Fund. The proposed projects would build out broadband systems serving the Highland and Bloomington communities based at ECB towers. Novus Labs, our commercial partner in these proposals, has agreed to provide reduced-rate internet service for qualifying low-income K-12 student homes. Whether or not these proposals become funded, their envisioning was a good exercise in how public/private partnerships could be leveraged in Wisconsin. These conversations have opened the door to more innovative ways of viewing and valuing state resources for broadband expansion, and have inspired ECB to take the lead on developing a legal template for multi-party investments to this end.