



GAC Recommends HSVPOA Hire Broadband Utility Director

Description

Opportunity for Hot Springs Village to Create Broadband Utility District

Greg Jones, Chairman of the Hot Springs Village POA Governmental Affairs Committee presented a recommendation to the Board of Directors on June 1, 2021. The recommendation to hire a broadband director was unanimously supported by the committee.

At the Board Discussion Session, Greg said the GAC had significant discussion before coming to this recommendation. [Broadband](#) has been a "key initiative that they have been focused on for several years."

Jones said the committee has heard from realtors who have been unable to sell homes that don't have broadband service and customers who pay high internet service fees.

The GAC has been working diligently with the state legislators "to look to see if there are ways that the Village could potentially benefit from some of the broadband grant programs that are being pushed by the federal government as part of COVID."

"The Village does not really receive any government grants, state or federal," stated the Chair. Jones said they are trying to find ways to "fix that problem."

"The state legislature passed the ability for organizations to create a broadband utility district," explained Jones. Originally this was going to be limited to cities and municipalities. "We fought hard to get Hot Springs Village included as part of that bill to allow us to establish a broadband utility district. We would be the only one because it actually limits to very large communities to be able to be a part of this, even if they aren't cities or municipalities."

Since we can create a broadband utility district, we will now be eligible for funds from the state. The state of Arkansas is due to receive billions of dollars from the federal government for infrastructure. This includes broadband buildout.

The GAC feels in order to achieve this, it will require dedicated staff or a “dedicated somebody to focus on this issue.”

What needs to happen – we need to talk with the carriers to see if we could potentially form a partnership with someone to even build such a broadband network to cover the whole or part of the Village.

GAC met with First Electric Co-op a few weeks ago. First Electric is working with the city of Cabot to build gigabit service for every place in Cabot. Cabot will lease the system from First Electric, using grant and bond funds.

Jones predicts that Cabot will be able to attract new residents by advertising as a “Gigabit City.” This new broadband service will even encourage the retention of current residents. We have the same opportunity in Hot Springs Village as Cabot does.

First Electric will start working on this for HSV in late 2022. If a grant was obtained, we could start working on this issue even earlier, because it is “really about the money,” said Greg.

AT&T has significantly pulled back their broadband offerings in the Village. There are some residents that do not have adequate broadband service. Greg said there is no broadband service on Minorca.

Greg feels that with a “concerted effort,” we could be successful at making this happen. This position could be filled by a staff person or a consultant who would need to understand technology, the political landscape, and potentially possess skills to write grant proposals.

Also, Jones wants to look at potential funding for other projects in the future. Arkansas will receive 3.2 billion dollars from the federal government for the infrastructure program and at this time it is unknown how these funds will be distributed. This may open the door for us to apply for other grants.

Board Member, Gary Belair asked, “did I hear you say that the legislature is going to allow this private community, Hot Springs Village, to participate in a grant which would be an exception to their history.”

Jones answered, “yes, we were able to get the legislature to pass, as part of the broadband utility district legislation, that it would allow us to create a broadband utility district, which would make us eligible for state grants.”

Pam Avila asked, “Greg, do you see this position as being full-time or as being part-time but extremely focused?”

Jones stated it probably could be part-time, but extremely focused. Potentially, this is something a consultant could do. Belair said the Finance and Planning Committee recommended this position be filled with a consultant.

“I find it appalling that we have 16,000 to 20,000 residents here who receive no benefit out of all this [tax] money the state is going to get. That to me is appalling. We need to figure out a way to change that. It doesn’t matter that we live in a gated and private community. We are still residents

of the state of Arkansas and we should get benefit out of this, just like anyone else in this state, in my opinion.”

Greg Jones

Additionally, Jones recommends finding people that are “friendly to us” to run for the legislature offices to replace those who may be retiring from public service positions in the near future.

By Cheryl Dowden, June 9, 2021

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