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ECFiber Expects Grant To Help Go Underground

Switch to VISPO Has Gone Smoothly

MAY 14, 2026

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ECFiber is working to connect people who have not been able to afford to sign up with the internet company, thanks to an anticipated \$3 million grant.

ECFiber is expecting the grant to subsidize long and complex connections in ECFiber's coverage area.

The "Affordable Long Drop Program" uses pandemic-era American Rescue Plan Act money to fund connections to customers who have not been able to afford ECFiber service.

The is being awarded by the Vermont Community Broadband Board, and is part of \$8 million that has been awarded to Vermont communications union districts statewide.

The money will be used to subsidize as many as 750 or more locations this summer that would otherwise not be able to afford to pay for the work.

ECFiber's policies require underground fiber installation to be installed in two-inch conduit at least 18 inches deep.

“Underground work is unpredictable and ECFiber could not afford to pay for that work and also meet our debt service requirements,” said FX Flinn, ECFiber’s governing board chair. “Over the years, we have had over 1,000 sign-ups remain unconnected because the cost of conduit installed was too much for the owner. We hope to get as many of those folks connected as possible, prioritizing Vermont taxpayers who owned the house they call home.”

Any Vermont homeowner whose property is classified as a homestead on their state taxes, and whose homesite valuation was under \$500,000 in fiscal year 2025, which ends June 30, 2025, automatically qualifies, Flinn said.

Some people may qualify, even if their homestead is valued more than \$500,000. For example, a retired couple on Social Security who live in a house whose evaluation exceeds \$500,000, but their total income is less than 400% of the federal poverty level guidelines, may qualify.

Renters may also qualify. ECFiber will have the landlord provide authorization to install service to the property.

The grant award was approved in October and ECFiber began contacting households who had signed up, but not been connected because of the conduit requirement. Their properties automatically qualify for full support of the conduit cost. Several dozen customers were connected last fall before the ground froze.

“The grant program allows us to just go ahead and install the conduit for many of our subscribers,” said Liane Allen, ECFiber’s chief community officer. “They won’t have to apply. We work off state data, and property surveys to confirm eligibility. Conduit, a pull string, a mast, or extra fiber—all the things we have been

charging extra for or telling the customer to let us know they had the work done—the grant can cover it.”

While the grant was approved in the fall, the Vermont Communications Broadband Board has not yet signed the grant contract. ECFiber officials believe that should happen any day.

“We’ve been pleased with [ECFiber’s] progress to date and look forward to seeing them use all the funding this summer,” said Christine Hallquist, executive director of the VCB, in anticipation of signing the grant contract.

Priority for the program will be for Vermonters living in their home. Second homeowners, and out of state homeowners may qualify similar to that of business property owners.

Flinn, the board chair, said that ECFiber had identified approximately 575 people who had signed up in the past that they were reaching out to to see if they were interested in getting connected through the program.

Flinn said due to restrictions on the ARPA funds, all services have to be installed and funds dispersed by September 30. That means, ECFiber will need to do about five installations per day, in order to use all of the funds within the timeframe.

“The bread and butter of our business and the reason we created ECFiber was to provide internet where the cable company wasn’t going to build and the phone company wasn’t going to invest and that’s what we’re doing with this money,” Flinn said.

Switchover

At the beginning of the year, ECFiber created a nonprofit operating partner focused solely on running its network after contracting with Maine-based Great Works Internet since 2022.

East Central Vermont Telecommunications District, which does business as ECFiber, formed the Vermont ISP Operating Company, or VISPO, as a nonprofit to take over its operations from GWI at the end of its contract, which ended December 31.

Now, VISPO has been the ECFiber operating partner for four and a half months without issue, Flinn said.

Flinn said the transition went off without a hitch, as he had said it would for the second half of 2025 as the switchover date approached.

“It was exactly as we predicted,” Flinn said. “That’s why I kept saying, nothing is going to change.

Despite the successful switchover to Vermont ISP Operating Company, ECFiber is not out of the legal woods yet.

Two lawsuits remain pending against ECFiber by Great Works Internet.

“Nothing is decided,” Flinn said.

One is a lawsuit against Flinn and the district for taking away their opportunity to be the operator. That included allegations of spying.

The second lawsuit involves allegations ECFiber had stolen people away after it decided to form its own operating company, VISPO.

GWI had initially sued Flinn, accusing him of conspiring to record a meeting and steal company secrets in an effort to have the excuse to end the contract with GWI.

GWI also accused ECFiber of trying to hire away employees that had been hired and trained by GWI.

GWI, in an attempt to keep the contract, sued, saying there was no way VISPO would be ready to provide reliable service for the 10,000 ECFiber subscribers in 31 communities.

Initially, Flinn said, the lawsuits were an effort to reclaim the role as the operator for ECFiber.

“Now, I suppose it is about getting money damages,” Flinn said. “They’ve got a long row to hoe.”

Flinn said he was positive old ECFiber employees would want to return.

“We were confident that those people wanted to work for ECFiber,” Flinn said. “We were not allowed to go and talk to them. We just put an [employment ad] on the VISPO website.”

Flinn said it was a dedicated group of employees who had helped to start ECFiber and continued its success.

“As we pulled this out of the ground with our fingernails, we hired people to come work with us and in many cases they learned by doing,” Flinn said. “Initially they were paid by ValleyNet, which turned the contract over to GWI. We were pretty sure a lot of the people who had been working for ECFiber for all of these years would leave their jobs with GWI and [continue to] work for ECFiber.”