

Recharged ECFiber receives grant for underground installation in its towns

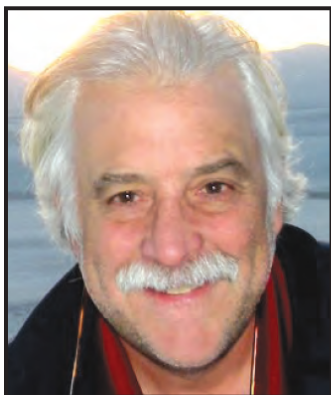
By Justin Bigos
Staff Writer

ECFiber — the trade name for the internet broadband network owned by the East Central Vermont Telecommunications District — has received a \$3 million “Affordable Long Drop Program” grant from the Vermont Community Broadband Board (VCBB) to help with the costs of nonstandard fiber installation for 1,000 eligible customers in its service area of 31 towns. The grant was made available in April and will expire on Sept. 30.

Nonstandard fiber installation includes underground conduit, aerial (above-ground) fiber connections longer than 400 feet, and other connections that require complicated construction. ECFiber requires underground fiber cable with two-inch conduit for its internet service.

The grant has arrived at a time after ECFiber fully transitioned to a new internet operator after a federal judge issued an order last summer helping to disentangle ECFiber from its previous operator, Great Works Internet.

F.X. Flinn, board chair of ECFiber, told the Standard this week that ECFiber is now operating efficiently with the Vermont ISP Operat-



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Board chair of ECFiber

ing Company, the nonprofit created by members of ECFiber’s board to serve as the company’s new operator. “The transition went smoothly,” said Flinn. “We suffered a series of storms in early January, just as we were implementing the first few days, so that was challenging. But as we predicted, the people who had been working for ECFiber all along continued with us. It was not like a whole new cast of characters came in. It’s the same people

who have been providing the same good service that ECFiber is known for.”

As one of the members of the nonprofit Vermont Communication Union District Association leadership, who meets regularly with the VCBB, Flinn was directly involved in the Vermont Broadband Board grant process. “They had \$7 or \$8 million of earned interest from the ARPA (federal Covid-era American Rescue Plan Act) grant funds that they had been dispensing to the communication union districts — including us — and were looking for a way of spending that to help the CUDs get more customers,” said Flinn.

ECFiber applied for the grant to serve its

towns’ residents who could not afford broadband service in their more rural areas. “Because their electricity [would need to be] delivered underground, we required that they install conduit for our fiber, and that can get expensive. I’d say typically you’re looking at a cost of \$10 to \$15 a foot installed. So even 100 feet, that’s \$1500 bucks. There are a lot of people who don’t have \$1500 bucks lying around to make that investment in their house,” he said.

Flinn explained that ECFiber, which is not a for-profit business, is not in a position to pay for cable installation outright. “[ECFiber is] a community response to the fact that the cable companies were not going to build out into the majority of our area. They were only going to build in dense and wealthier places like Norwich, Wilder, White River Junction, Quechee, Woodstock. They weren’t going to be building out into the wilds of Barnard or Tunbridge or Vershire or Chelsea.”

Flinn said that anyone in ECFiber’s 31 towns who is a Vermont income taxpayer, owns their residential home, filed the HS 122 Homestead Declaration, and whose property was assessed for less than \$500,000 for fiscal year 2025 will have the cost of installing their conduit covered by the grant. “If the estimated cost of doing that is more than \$8,500, we have to check with the broadband board before we proceed,” added Flinn.

Since receiving the grant in April, ECFiber has completed installation work at approximately 175 locations, said Flinn. “When the construction season got underway, we were trying hard to get to as many [sites] as we possibly can because we want to spend all \$3 million that we got. By and large, this is an easy and immediate benefit for Vermonters who live in their own home,” he said.

“Even though we’re a government, we can’t compel anybody to take our service,” Flinn said of ECFiber’s role and limitations. “We have no call on the resources of any of the towns. If we get into any kind of financial difficulty, we can’t prevent competitors from competing with us. So even though we’re like a utility, we’re not like a utility. And, as a government, we don’t have any taxing powers. It’s a pretty unique deal.”

Flinn feels good about the overall success of ECFiber’s mission and is optimistic about its future impact on rural communities. “We’ve issued 70 million dollars’ worth of bonds. We’ve gotten a total of about \$20 million in grants over the last 15 years,” he said. “Just this week we actually finished building our network — I got word on Wednesday that the last fiber service area had been lit. This dream that Dave Brown and Dan Leavitt had back in 2006 is physically, at least, complete. What’s not complete is we haven’t gotten everybody hooked up.”