



Otter Tail County Broadband Community Vision and Project Development Summary

Background and process:

In early 2020, Otter Tail County was selected as one of five new Blandin Broadband Communities working in partnership with the Foundation to expand broadband access and to increase technology adoption. Each community will receive up to \$75,000 to allocate to technology projects using the Intelligent Community approach as the guiding framework.

Blandin Foundation has worked with over 40 communities – cities, counties, tribal governments, school districts and regional entities on this program over the past decade.

This report documents the discussion and decisions made by the Otter Tail County community through their Blandin Broadband Community Vision and Project Development process, including the Vision and Brainstorm meetings and an online voting process. The process occurred August 20th through September 8th via online Zoom meetings with voting via Survey Monkey. Over 100 people participated in some part of the, representing key sectors of the community, including business, education, health care, government and residents.

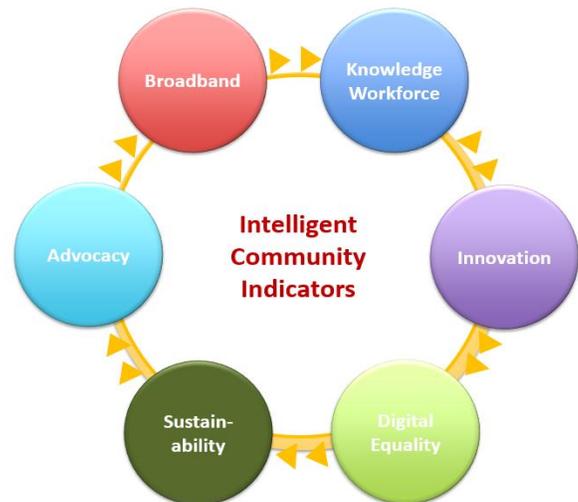
Thank you to the Steering Team that helped to design, plan and implement this process which needed to be moved online due to COVID – 19 health protocols. The Steering Team managed the invitation process and encouraged participation. Their work will continue on to turn project ideas into actual projects with project leaders, teams, goals, strategies and budget.

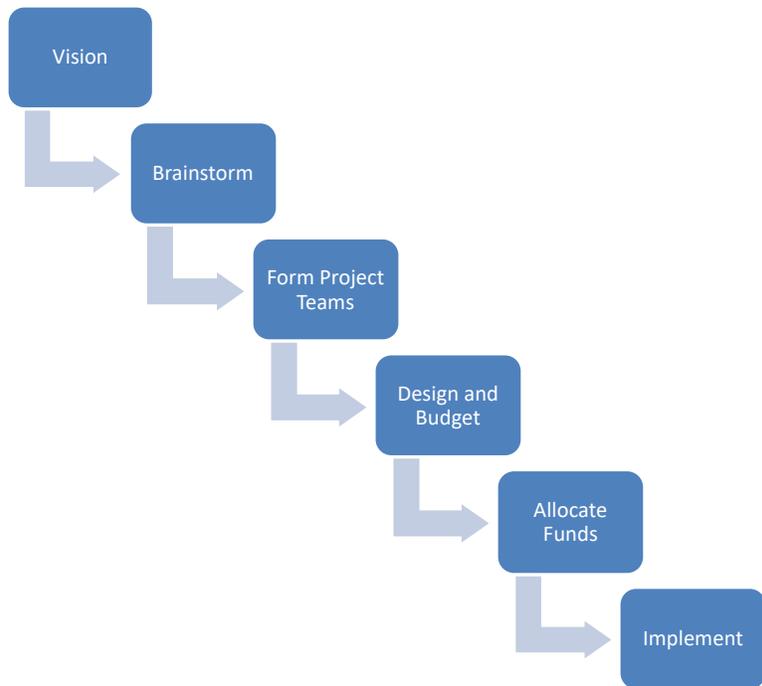
Prior to COVID-19, Blandin Foundation used a three-hour Vision Meeting to:

- review the Intelligent Community approach
- highlight and discuss assets and gaps for each of the six elements
- create a set of desired outcomes
- brainstorm project ideas, and
- prioritize project ideas through voting and volunteering.

The new process is executed over a two to three-week process:

- Online survey focusing on each of the Intelligent Community elements
- Vision Meeting with discussion of assets and gaps and development of desired outcomes
- Brainstorm Meeting to generate project ideas
- Online community voting to prioritize projects
- Online process to recruit project volunteers





The Vision Meeting occurred August 20 via Zoom with 29 attendees. The Brainstorm Meeting was held August 25 with 24 participants. The voting was open August 30 – September 8; 104 community members took part in the voting process.

The next steps will be for the project teams to formalize project proposals for consideration by the Steering Team which will prioritize projects and allocate Blandin Foundation grant funds.

This report summarizes this process to date.

Vision Meeting

The purpose of the Vision Meeting is to familiarize community members with the Blandin Broadband Community program, list and discuss community assets and gaps regarding the six Intelligent Community elements (www.intelligentcommunity.org) and to develop a consensus on the community's desired outcomes from their participation in the Blandin process.

In essence, the Intelligent Community method (www.intelligentcommunity.org) can be summarized as follows: on a base of broadband infrastructure and services, a community can work to support the creation, attraction and support of a knowledge workforce; spur the adoption of innovation throughout the community; adopt sustainability practices and address digital inclusion. With these activities, a community can create both internal and external marketing and advocacy messages to attract people and investment.

Blandin Foundation consultant Bill Coleman teamed with local leaders to describe the Intelligent Community framework to all participants. Coleman provided general background information and local leaders provided their more knowledgeable local perspective. Selected highlights from the pre-registration community survey were included in the presentation. Complete responses to the open-ended survey questions can be found online here:

<https://blandinfoundation.org/content/uploads/Otter-Tail-Registration-Survey-Results.pdf>

All of this information was used as a community conversation starter at the Vision Meeting and will be used as a tool to measure progress over the two-year Broadband Community program.

Following the ICF presentation, attendees were placed in Zoom breakout rooms to delve more deeply into their Intelligent Community element. Attendees brought their own personal experience and

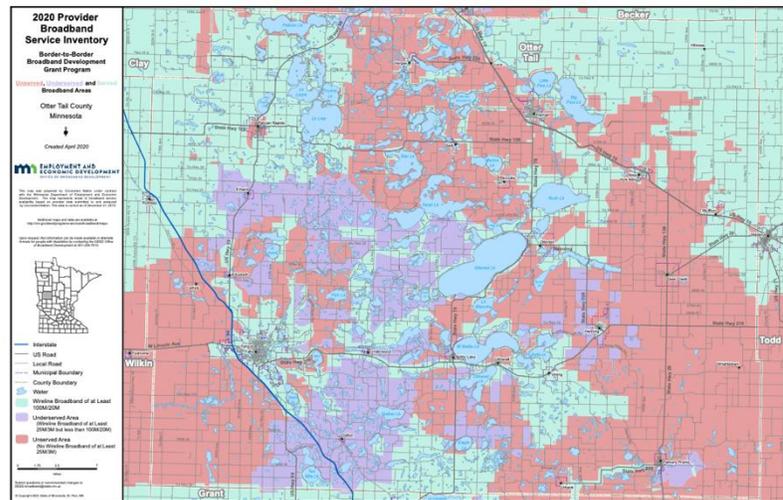
nuanced knowledge to the discussion. Each of the groups were charged with and accomplished the following tasks for their assigned Intelligent Community element:

- a) Build on the list of Assets and Gaps/Barriers presented by the community presenters
- b) Create a list of Desired Outcomes

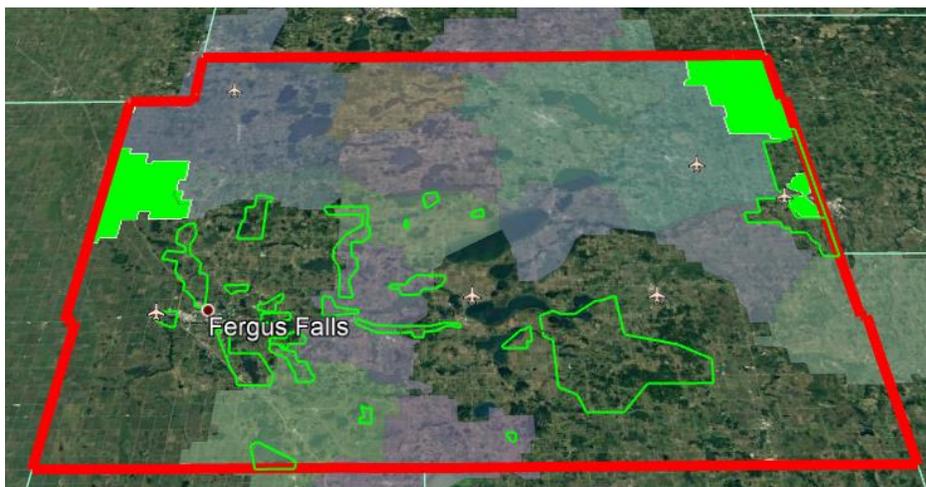
The following summary includes information from community presenters, the community survey and the community discussion of the Vision meeting.

Broadband

This map illustrates the availability of broadband within Otter Tail County. Areas in red are considered unserved (broadband services of less than 25 Mb/3 Mb). Areas in purple are considered under-served (services between 25 Mb/3 Mb and 100 Mb/20 Mb). Areas in green are considered served (services in excess of 100 Mb/20 Mb). Unserved areas are considered a priority for the Minnesota Border to Border Broadband Grant program.



Since the county undertook a broadband feasibility study several years ago, there has been close collaboration between several area broadband providers that are using federal broadband funding programs to improve broadband services.



This map shows the areas in green where fiber to the home networks are in place, greatly improving access to broadband services. The lightly shaded areas of various colors are areas that have fiber build-out plans currently in place, prospectively by the end of 2021.

While local providers are making significant investments over the next several years, there are no known broadband improvement plans for large portions of the county, leaving out 6,689 households, totaling

over 15,000, or 25%, of Otter Tail County residents. Consultants working on the feasibility study estimated that building new networks to these residents would cost an estimated \$50 million dollars in investment. Providers would need a 56% grant from some combination of funding sources to make this deployment financially feasible.

The following perspectives were harvested from the pre-registration survey for the Vision meeting. Full results from that survey can be found here: <https://blandinfoundation.org/content/uploads/Otter-Tail-Registration-Survey-Results.pdf>

- Broadband is essential for everyday life – work, school & business.
- Our Internet can be slow. I have to rework my daily schedule around when the Internet works.
- I have Fiber to the Home and it is amazing!
- Our business connection’s lack of speed has become very pronounced since COVID-19.

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Local telecommunications companies	Very difficult for schools to deliver online education in areas without broadband
Industries that are heavily dependent on reliable, fast Internet (tourism, ag, etc.	Communities without broadband are not going to attract residents and businesses
Strong government partners	
Lakes that are density development magnets, making broadband possible	

Participants were asked “If we are truly successful in this initiative over the next 18 months, what will be different?” “What are we trying to accomplish?”

Desired Outcomes
Increased access to families/individuals without internet access (e.g. subsidized services, centralized wi-fi, etc.)
Enhancements for kids and educational systems.
Public education around broadband, why it's important, etc.

Knowledge Workforce

Otter Tail County workforce has the following characteristics:

- 20% of jobs are in health care and social assistance
- 18% of jobs are in manufacturing
- 11% of jobs are in retail
- 91.5% have at least a high school diploma
- 62% are college educated

The information below is taken from the community survey.

- OTC is working hard to promote housing development necessary for workforce
- OTC has good schools, a college, strong manufacturing and health care sectors
- OTC has strong and unique communities
- Unfilled jobs at the low end; shortage of high-end jobs
- Working from home is an opportunity to grow the population and economy

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Strong K-12	Availability of quality broadband
Active business community	Limits ability to attract residents or businesses
M State	Speed doesn't meet expectations of visitors - and that influences desire to come or move permanently
Build off work of RRI	Limiting for education system with distance learning
Quality of place	

If we are truly successful in this initiative over the next 18 months, what will we have accomplished in Knowledge Workforce?

Desired Outcomes
Continue to recruit younger population with RRI efforts - ensure all components are in place
Access and training for displaced workers is available - M State as a partner to offer credit classes or certificates for technology skills - foundation could offer scholarships
County wide community access points / facility training and learning exist - community ed, libraries, etc.
Enhanced High School career fairs and hands on experiences - virtual support?

Innovation

There are many innovative initiatives occurring in Otter Tail County, including:

- Fergus Falls IQ Academy, a leading MN K-12 education innovator
- Fergus Falls Telework Initiative
- Smart Home products from local companies

The information below is taken from the community survey.

- COVID 19 has motivated many businesses and organizations to move online in new ways.
- Remote meetings are now the norm.
- Businesses increasing social media, now moving into online payments
- Need to remember the ADA accessibility standards as we do this.

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Telework Handbook	HR Culture - Online onboarding Firms/resources to provide direction
Willingness/acceptance/desire to embrace technology	Human desire for in-person interaction
Telework Hotel/Business Incubator	Large numbers of family business changing hands soon
Small business innovation due to the pandemic	
Large numbers of family business changing hands soon	
IQ Academy	

If we are very successful on **Innovation**, in the next 18 months, we will achieve or make significant progress on the following desired outcomes:

Desired Outcomes
Brand Otter Tail County as a Telework Friendly area boosted by our natural assets
Lifestyle marketing
Awareness of Educational opportunities in Otter Tail County
Telework Hotel and Business Incubator with support to aid an entrepreneur

Digital Equity

Local Presentation:

The lack of broadband has created disparities for students for as many of five years. Schools have tried to overcome this through 1:1 device initiatives. Overcoming this disparity is critical. But it affects not just students, but all residents as they search for jobs, access health care and go through life.

Community Survey Results:

- Kids lacking connectivity and quality computers have a real challenge
- There is a widening skills gap. People struggle to accomplish health care, education and government tasks online.
- Cost and location determine people’s ability to get online
- “While more people have access to devices like smart phones, affordability of regular Internet service and/or lack of access to broadband Internet service continues to be a concern. In addition, a widening skills gap is apparent. As more and more moves online – access to employment, healthcare, government services, financial services –some are being left behind. And these are the basics – as more and more jobs become high tech, low cost, low barriers opportunities to re-skill and access to tools, resources and service to assist is needed.”

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Public Libraries & now offering hotspots	Lack of broadband for all residents
Community connections and support	Some residents have not experienced high speed Internet which creates a knowledge gap
M-State offerings/contributes to diversity	People who lack the necessary equipment, commuters, updated operating systems
Schools that are responsive to workforce needs; helping families with connectivity issues	Broadband and technology devices not affordable for all people due to high prices and lower incomes
Local Internet Service Providers dedicated to serving local, rural communities	Lack of adequate broadband “lifeline” programs
People creating study groups so that people without the Internet at home can access at a friends’ home	The inconvenience and inefficiency of having to drive or walk somewhere to access the Internet.
Supportive communities and community members	Lack of Internet causes disadvantages for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students • job seekers • employers and small business owners • community & economic

If we are very successful on Digital Equity in the next 18 months, we will achieve or make significant progress on the following desired outcomes:

Desired Outcomes
Expanded access, even if only temporary
Access for all
Eliminate disparities in quality of access
Gigabit connectivity for all
Devices and skills for all
All students can learn remotely
Some people willing to have less so that others can have some

Advocacy

Local Presentation

Options for communications used to be print, radio and local TV. These clear channels for communication no longer exist in the same way. Rural areas are slower to adopt advances in technology and the capacity within organizations to adapt is an issue. Equitable access and capacity building opportunities equals a more equitable social and economic landscape overall.

Community Survey

- We really have the full range of offerings here - arts, recreation, healthcare. We need to continue to check in with those industries to make sure we're doing what we can to protect and enhance them. We also need more options in quality childcare and housing, and more friendly tools about how to start a business here.
- High Speed Internet as an asset to the county as well as a recruitment tool for industries interested in relocation
- The assets exist, but the exposure to the outside community is limited. We need some activities and events that target the audience we are looking to draw to come and stay in our community.
- Top prospects for people to move here are ones who can work from home.

The information below came from the small group breakout discussion:

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Chamber of Commerce- advocacy could present	Capacity
Chamber Cafe & YPN	Social media
Otter Tail County	Changes in print habits- no longer daily, rising cost of print media
Otter Tail Lakes Country Association	
CARES funding- \$125,000 to Broadband, \$75,00 to Viking Library, \$200,000 to OTCLC	
Leighton Broadcasting	

Assets	Barriers / Gaps
Daily Journal/ other local papers	
PEG Access	
Park Region Telephone's TV studio	
Community Ed & partners- direct outreach efforts	
Social media	
Jean Bowman's Signature Events	

If we are very successful on Advocacy in the next 18 months, we will achieve or make significant progress on the following desired outcomes:

Desired Outcomes
Reach beyond our community and entice people to believe that they can relocate in OTC and have business opportunities and make community connections
All people in the county have the necessary skills to access broadband
Wi-fi for all
Integrated information infrastructure

Brainstorm Meeting Summary

Otter Tail County stakeholders met on August 25 to create a list of prospective projects that would lead to the desired outcomes established during the Vision meeting. The participants were separated into discussion groups and spent about 30 minutes discussing project ideas. When this task was accomplished, the participants reconvened as a single group to list project ideas. Once all project ideas were captured, the project voting procedure was explained.

The project ideas which were then imported into an online survey tool for voting. The web link was promoted to attendees and more generally across the community for voting. Each participant had 100 points to allocate among their favorite projects so as to indicate their support. Voters also were able to volunteer for one or more projects thus creating immediate project teams.

The project ideas, voting summary and project teams are shown below.

Project	Total Points	Team Members
8. Work with wireless broadband access providers, including A Better Wireless - Broadband	1209	Paul Haarstick Lee Rogness Glenna Ann Thulin Tim Sullivan Dawn Godel Sheila Seelhammer Andrew Tischer Marlene Fondrick

Project	Total Points	Team Members
13. Provide free or low-cost wi-fi throughout the county - Broadband	1148	Jeffrey Drake Dawn Godel Steve Smith
9. Entice additional broadband competition to spur competitive pricing - Broadband	1050	Dawn Godel Sheila Seelhammer Andrew Tischer Chad Gabrielson Casey Ward
3. Attract more higher technology companies to the area. - Advocacy	1033	Annie Deckert Anna Wasescha Harold Stanislawski Lee Rogness Tim Birkeland Blaine Novak Melissa Jensen Chad Gabrielson Casey Ward Glenna Ann Thulin Ryan Tungseth Dave Haglund
1. Promote telework and turn visitors into residents - Advocacy	889	Jeffrey Drake Annie Deckert Paul Haarstick Rebecca Umland Sandra King Anna Wasescha Ryan Pesch Lee Rogness Candace J Heathington Jean Bowman Harold Stanislawski Tim Birkeland Randy Dorn Deanna Sinclair
30. Develop Internet packages that include appropriate Internet service packages and training for home offices, small businesses, cities, townships - Knowledge Workforce	572	Tim Sullivan
11. Increase the number of free Wi-Fi access points throughout the county. - Broadband	515	Paul Haarstick Erin Smith Julie Lammers Klara Beck
12. Provide hotspots and devices at the library and other locations that can be checked out by community members. Provide training on the use of the hotspots. - Broadband	378	Paul Haarstick Erin Smith Jeffrey Drake Gail Hedstrom Julie Adams

Project	Total Points	Team Members
17. Ensure that affordable rental housing developments have broadband as part of the rental package. - Digital Equity	345	Erin Smith Paul Haarstick Klara Beck Anna Wasescha
10. Install and maintain Wi-Fi in one city park in each OTC community. - Broadband	338	Paul Haarstick Erin Smith Rebecca Umland Julie Lammers
2. Build and implement programs that teach businesses, cities, townships, churches to have online marketing presence. - Advocacy	305	Annie Deckert Paul Haarstick Anna Wasescha Ryan Pesch Candace J Heathington Jean Bowman Harold Stanislawski Mike Trudeau Klara Beck Michael Burgraff
18. Ensure that provided school devices are of high quality to ensure a positive experience. - Digital Equity	296	Jeffrey Drake Blaine Novak Melissa Jensen Sandra King
21. Offer 'zoom room' space at libraries and community centers for studying, meetings, other groups - Innovation	277	Erin Smith Annie M Wrigg Mike Trudeau Annie Deckert Gail Hedstrom Julie Adams Leslie Lee
23. Identify and promote existing inventory of technology spaces and assets (computer labs, etc.) to a broad audience, existing residents, visitors, etc. Ensure that they have state-of-the-art equipment to enhance user experience (microphones, cameras, printers and scanners) - both fixed investments and portable assets (laptops, webcams, camera) - Innovation	271	Erin Smith Sandra King Rebecca Umland Lori Larson Val Martin
7. Promote local newspaper access, both print and online access - Advocacy	255	Chad Gabrielson Anna Wasescha Candace J Heathington Jan Smith Elizabeth Eidal Rebs Gilliland Ed Pawlenty

Project	Total Points	Team Members
28. Host summer and year-round coding camps and other youth exposure to technology, including a focus on possible careers - Knowledge Workforce	185	Erin Smith Jeffrey Drake Lori Larson Paul Haarstick Marcia
22. Create and maintain technology equipped space for workers or others (more office-size for 1-2 people) - Innovation	136	Erin Smith Annie Deckert Paul Haarstick
25. Provide technology upgrades for community rooms and organizations that support business, community development, etc. - Innovation	129	Erin Smith Val Martin
5. Create and maintain an online community calendar/community portal - Advocacy	126	Paul Haarstick Jean Bowman Mike Trudeau Klara Beck Michael Burgraff
27. Work with schools to provide space for commuter labs, access to computers - Knowledge Workforce	126	Erin Smith Mike Trudeau Jeffrey Drake
26. Install and maintain smart rooms at the libraries for classes or meetings, etc - Innovation	116	Erin Smith Rebecca Umland
19. Provide Internet access and devices to people looking for work and applying for jobs. – Digital Equity	100	Erin Smith Mike Trudeau Annie Deckert
31. Launch a Digital Navigators program that will help residents, businesses and organizations effectively use technology in their daily lives. - Innovation	95	Erin Smith Mike Trudeau Jeffrey Drake Annie Deckert Jan Smith
20. Provide warming shelters so individuals without vehicles can use Wi-Fi during winter months. - Digital Equity / Broadband	90	Erin Smith Annie M Wrigg
29. Provide enhanced educational opportunities to increase utility of technology - Knowledge Workforce	77	Erin Smith Marcia Mike Trudeau
4. Promote the opportunities for reduced rate programs such as Lifeline - Advocacy	72	Lee Rogness Chad Gabrielson
24. Investigate shared community subscriptions to communication technology equipment and online services (e.g. GoToMeeting, Zoom, etc.), internet costs for non-profits. - Innovation	63	Erin Smith Mike Trudeau Tim Sullivan
6. Educate people about the Internet and how to use it. Include information about the differences between upload and download speeds - Advocacy	60	Mike Trudeau Ryan Pesch Erin Smith Paige Carlson

Project	Total Points	Team Members
15. Provide spaces for online legal and other important proceedings with access to technology and privacy - Digital Equity	55	Erin Smith Paul Haarstick
16. Provide scholarships for digital connection - Digital Equity	45	Erin Smith
14. Provide training for technology platforms like Zoom and Sling. - Digital Equity	44	Jeffrey Drake Erin Smith Mike Trudeau Ryan Pesch

Next Steps:

- 1) The report should be sent out to everyone who participated in either the Vision or Brainstorm meetings and other key stakeholders¹. Additional project ideas are welcome and people not in attendance should be welcomed to propose projects or volunteer to be on a project team. Steering team leaders may want to recruit leaders for those projects without volunteers or try to identify other projects that might want to incorporate all or a portion of the project concept.
- 2) Blandin consultants will schedule a project development meeting shortly to assist team members begin to develop their proposals. Groups are free to begin their work immediately.
- 3) Don't forget to create a project team to implement the PCs for People distribution of 50 desktop computers.
- 4) The Project Teams are charged with developing the project, with the lead organization writing and submitting the joint community application. Projects proposals will first be submitted to the Steering Committee for review by a date to be determined. The Steering team will prioritize the applications as necessary. The Steering Team may provide feedback for strengthening selected projects through combining projects, enhanced collaboration or other strategies.
- 5) Once a slate of projects is finalized, the project descriptions with budgets, including a combined project summary budget should be submitted to Blandin Foundation for administrative approval.
- 6) Some projects may need to be withheld to await Round Two Blandin Broadband Community Grant funding or may be recommended to pursue other sources of funding.

¹ Also, feel free to share the link to Otter Tail BBC page on Blandin Foundation's website, which includes proceedings from both meetings. <https://blandinfoundation.org/articles/otter-tail-blandin-broadband-community/>