

The Southern Vermont Communications Union District (CUD)

On the upcoming Town Meeting ballot there will be an item seeking permission for the Town of Sunderland to join a Communications Union District (CUD) for southern Vermont. This effort is being spear-headed by a Broad Band Task Force composed of representatives from many towns in Bennington County. The taskforce seeks to promote formation of a CUD according to Vermont Statute as laid out in 30 V.S.A. Ch 82. The aim is to include towns in Bennington County and perhaps neighboring towns in Rutland and Windham Counties. The CUD purpose is to study the feasibility of building and operating a new broadband internet system to provide service to member towns, particularly in areas that are now underserved. This can work through joining the purchasing power of many underserved areas banded together to build a critical mass of customers. Successful, operating CUDs already exist (such as the East Central Vermont CUD), and many others across the state are being organized.

Here is how it all works:

1. A town votes to join a CUD.
2. Each member town selects two representatives to the Board of Directors of the CUD. This generally includes a member of the select board and another member of the community.
3. The CUD Board of Directors applies for grant(s) to support a feasibility study for providing broadband throughout the area of the member towns. Grants are available from several Vermont and federal agencies, and the Vermont Legislature passed specific legislation in 2019 to support this sort of effort. The Legislature also funded & filled a new position to support these efforts.
4. With feasibility reports in hand the Board may request proposals from both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations to build and operate a system providing broad band internet, with a goal of serving all residents and businesses in member towns. There are multiple providers interested in contracting to provide necessary services.
5. Costs not covered by grants are funded by bonds. Financing is now being made available to viable operations at favorable rates to support these efforts. At no time are any costs or risks borne by town taxpayers. Only the CUD is responsible. By Statute, the CUD can't accept town funds (with the exception of normal subscriber fees, if the town is a customer).
6. Once the CUD system is ready to go citizens can subscribe to the service as they do for other available internet services. Rates are expected to be competitive.
7. Financial obligations of the CUD are paid by the subscriber fees.

If the Town of Sunderland joins the CUD, it will be in on the ground floor to influence CUD policy. It takes only two towns to form a CUD; other towns can join later by action of select boards. It should be noted that at least 9 towns in the county already plan votes on joining. For comments or questions, email Andrew McKeever at selectboard@sunderlandvt.org.