

ISLAND WIDE BROADBAND NETWORK COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The *New Shoreham 2016 Comprehensive Plan* identified broadband as a key economic development policy for Block Island:

EDI.K. Improve access to sustainable broadband internet service for residents, businesses, government and visitors

Keeping the island digitally connected to the world at large is a critical economic issue. Residents seeking work off-island and non-residents providing skills to the island which may otherwise not be available, depend on both commuting and telecommuting. Reliable year-round transportation and access to high speed internet are both crucial. Many residents cannot work mainland jobs and many jobs on the island cannot be held by day commuters because of the limited winter ferry schedule.

The inconsistency of the internet connection, including frequent and sometimes lengthy outages, affects many residents who work, and also vacationers who want to stay connected to their off-island work life. It particularly affects those running a business on the island who rely on the internet for many aspects of their operation, including ordering supplies, marketing, making sales, taking reservations, etc. Tourism in general could be negatively impacted if Block Island becomes known for limited connectivity as increasingly people expect to stay connected while traveling.

Efforts to improve internet service on the island have been underway for several years, involving the Town and its Information Technology (IT) consultants, as well as the Block Island Residents Association and the Block Island Chamber of Commerce. The New Shoreham “Broadband Working Group”, established in 2014, identified options for improving internet reliability through better or alternative broadband access from the mainland. As part of the offshore wind farm project, a subsea power cable including fiber is connected to the mainland for wind farm management and the Town has secured the rights to eight strands of fiber. The Town is currently working with consultants on a universal Home to Network design, cost estimates, and an internet service provider.

Reliable high speed internet is critical to the school, the medical center, the police department and the economy as a whole. Economic activity through telecommunication is not only critical in today’s economy, but is of particular importance on Block Island with its combination of geographic isolation, high energy and transportation costs, and sensitive natural and cultural environment. Jobs provided or enhanced through telecommunication not only contribute to a year-round economy, but have little, if any, secondary negative impacts, such as large energy consumption and waste generation. For more information, review the New Shoreham Broadband Plan completed in January of 2015.

While there may not be broad economic development plans, policies, or tax incentives currently in place or offered through the Town, several major economic development initiatives including those listed above involve significant prior and future investments by the Town. For example, plans have been completed for the Broadband project with a major goal being the advancement of the local business climate on Block Island.