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# Task force to study UTOPIA's future

Issue in Brigham City could take months to resolve

By **TIM GURRISTER**

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BRIGHAM CITY — The 10-member task force is now empaneled that will study the city's future with UTOPIA, including the possibility of ending it.

Even with the potential infusion of \$300 million or more in fresh capital from an Australian investment firm, city officials last month decided to form the Fiber Optic Task Force to weigh its options with UTOPIA. The troubled Internet access network that promises far higher download speeds than is commercially available.

Municipally owned by 11 cities, Utah Telecommunications Open Infrastructure Agency — has stalled for various reasons since its late 1990s inception. Brigham pays \$435,000 a year on its bonds for UTOPIA, payments owed for 25 years or more. Layton is on the hook for \$2 million a year.

Brigham's ad hoc task force will be chaired by Bob Marabella, a realtor and former two-term city council member. Members are local business and civic leaders, including Alan Shakespear, head of information technology for the Box Elder School District and a one-time candidate for the state school board, as well as former long-time Box Elder County Attorney Jon Bunderson, now in private practice.

Others named to the task force are CPA Brandon Broadhead, Karen Nisonger, Corbett Austin, Jeremy Hunsaker, county tourism head Joan Hammer and former city council members Mike Phillips and Doug Wight.

"Some members of the task force are pretty vocal in their opposition to any further involvement with UTOPIA," Shakespear said after the task force had its first meeting Thursday. "It certainly isn't stacked with people sharing the same opinions."

The task force time frame will likely be a matter of months, not weeks, Shakespear said. "Our charge is to evaluate all the options and make a recommendation to the city council on how to proceed in whatever time it takes to form a consensus. I hope it's less than a matter of months."

All the options are difficult, he said, including "letting the system go dark" as getting out is described. "There's no easy option. The liability of the bonds doesn't go away easily."

"There's no clear way forward on this. It's a muddy, murky path ahead."

"Build-out" for the UTOPIA network has been delayed for years for a variety of reasons, including contractor problems and a federal grant program closing down that had assisted subscribers in paying hookup fees.

UTOPIA officials count an estimated 20,000 subscribers statewide to date, far short of the goal of 153,000.

An expected infusion of capital to complete the build-out, \$300 million or more, was announced in December with UTOPIA'S signing of a pre-development agreement with Macquarie Capital Group, an Australian investment firm that specializes in running public-private partnerships.

Macquarie has been seeking fees from the 11 UTOPIA cities for an engineering feasibility study before it signs final papers to complete the build-out. Brigham's share is an estimated \$13,000.

Last year, Provo sold its solely owned fiber optic network experiment, iProvo, to Google to get out from under operational costs. The deal didn't relieve the city from paying off the ten years worth of bonds remaining for the system. Incorporated in 2004 with a \$39 million price tag, it failed to attract enough subscribers to be lucrative, according to news reports.

Terms have Google upgrading the system and offering seven years of free service to Provo subscribers.

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