

**Senate Finance Committee**

**Senator Oelslager**

**Chair**

**Proponent SB225 Testimony**

**Jennifer Simon, Executive Director, Regional Innovation**

**Ohio University**

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## Senate Bill 225: Ohio Broadband Development Grant Program

On behalf of a group of public and private organizations from SE Ohio who have come together to try and address the digital divide that exists in our corner of the state, I urge the passage of SB225 and companion HB378 in creating the Ohio Broadband Expansion Grant Program. Broadband access is vital to receiving healthcare and government services as well as for students seeking an education. While these are concerning, I am also troubled by how the lack of broadband cripples rural entrepreneurs and businesses and creates one more hurdle for competing in the global economy.

In collaboration with ten organizations, we have built a Regional Innovation Network in Southeast Ohio with the mission of supporting entrepreneurship as an economic driver in communities such as Somerset, Zanesville, Marietta, Portsmouth, Ironton, and Athens. Beyond these towns, we serve 28 counties in Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia. Our focus is on product-based entrepreneurial development; using the workforces' skills gained through manufacturing, coal mining, power plant operations, farming, and artisan labor, we help people transfer these skills into developing and commercializing products and creating new businesses and jobs. For these rural-based businesses to succeed, broadband is not a "nice to have" but a "must have" to compete in the fast-paced, connected global economy. Lack of connectivity negatively affects all aspects of a product-based business including sales, marketing, communication with customers, manufacturing, logistics, distribution, and shipping.

Historically, rural areas have been the last to get connected to basic utilities and infrastructure for varying reasons, including cost. Throughout the past 20 years, I have proudly watched and participated in, the rollout of the Appalachian Highway Development System. In my role as Assistant Director in the Governor's Office of Appalachia from 1999 - 2004, I managed grants bringing water and wastewater to our region's most remote areas. Those before me witnessed the rural electrification of our country along with the buildout of necessary telephone infrastructure. As with telephone, electricity, roads and water, rural businesses need a solution for fixing the economic inequities that lack of internet connectivity creates. The Ohio Broadband Grant Program provides the answer by filling in the gaps in last mile implementation by incentivizing action by providers and communities to build out this essential utility.

As was quoted in previous testimony provided by Steve Golding, "the authors of the Ohio State study: ***Connecting the Dots of Ohio's Broadband Policy*** note, economists have estimated the average consumer benefits of broadband access to be between \$1,500 and \$2,000. Based on that estimate, the economic value of expanding access to all Ohioans under the most conservative adoption scenario is \$1 billion over the next 15 years." We must not ignore what the lack of this legislation means to our entire State's economy.

In closing, I want to express my gratitude to you for the work you do to ensure Ohio competes nationally in education and its economy. The SB225 and companion HB378 in creating the Ohio Broadband Expansion Grant Program means that the sky is the limit for Ohio's success.