



Ohio Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee
Ohio House Bill 13 Proponent Testimony
Peter Voderberg, BroadbandOhio
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Good morning Chairman Wilson, Vice Chair McColley, and Ranking Member Williams. My name is Peter Voderberg, and I am the head of BroadbandOhio, a division within the Development Services Agency. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak in support of House Bill 13.

Before giving my testimony, I want to be clear that I am here to speak in support of the grant provisions of the legislation. There are other provisions that are being discussed, including how to negotiate pole attachment fees and a pilot program with electric companies. We are officially neutral on these provisions, even while being proponents of the grant.

The DeWine/Husted administration has been taking a very deliberate and methodical approach to tackling the broadband challenges facing the state. Right away, InnovateOhio was established to streamline government processes and bring innovation to governance. Connected Nation Ohio was provided a grant of nearly \$1 million from the Third Frontier to improve upon our outdated coverage maps for the state. An RFI was released in June of 2019 seeking input on how to best leverage state assets in expanding broadband.

Ultimately, the responses to the RFI, coupled with additional research, led to the state's first Broadband Strategy, which was released in December of last year. The major categories of that strategy are telehealth, regulatory reform, economic development and entrepreneurial activities, digital literacy, rights-of-way, an office of broadband, and a statewide grant.

The administration has already begun tackling telehealth in a pilot project in Monroe County. On regulatory reform, the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) has created a streamlined online permitting process for access to non-interstate rights of way to maintain consistency in how people interact with the state, and the Common Sense Initiative is working with the industry to identify key regulatory issues that stand in the way of broadband expansion. For economic development and entrepreneurial activities, JobsOhio is looking to invest in companies that are investing in Ohio.

The Office of Workforce Transformation is working with the Ohio Library Council on digital literacy programs so that people understand how to use technology and how it can fit into their lives. As for rights-of-way, ODOT, in conjunction with BroadbandOhio, is finalizing a statewide interstate right-of-way access plan so companies can work with a single entity from one side of the state to the other on broadband issues.

For an office of broadband, BroadbandOhio was created. It acts as the one-stop shop to work on connectivity issues day in and day out. BroadbandOhio is dedicated to two principles. The first is bringing high-speed internet access to every Ohioan. That does not mean that every Ohioan will want to have internet access. Instead, BroadbandOhio will make sure that no matter where you live, you will have at least one provider who

give internet that meets the federal definition of high speed, which is currently 25 Mbps download speed and 3 Mbps upload.

The second principle is building a best-in-class broadband network in Ohio. That does not mean that Ohio will own the network. What it means is that the service is reliable and dependable wherever you happen to be in the state.

BroadbandOhio is technology and provider neutral. We are interested in innovators and new ways of getting internet to the homes.

And as for the statewide grant, House Bill 13 has been the focus of the efforts of BroadbandOhio. We know that during this pandemic, the digital divide has grown more apparent. Many students had no way to connect to the internet from home to be able to do schoolwork, talk to their teachers, or continue their education. School districts did a phenomenal job of trying to keep those students engaged through take home packets, sending home technology, or even putting Wi-Fi hotspots on busses to drive them through areas that lack internet access. Companies did their best to send workers home with the technology they needed to continue to work from home, but without a reliable internet connection those employees had no way of operating remotely. And for people in recovery or with chronic conditions, receiving telehealth was safer than coming to a hospital, but is impossible without a stable internet connection.

There are two main issues that keep people from being connected – availability and affordability. Availability is the ability to have internet access in your home. This is a problem that affects rural, suburban, and urban communities, where they have no internet providers at all.

Affordability is a barrier that keeps Ohioans all over the state from being able to use the internet in their homes. In many areas, even when internet is available, it may not be affordable, or the home may not have a device to connect.

HB 13 tackles the first of these two issues, that of availability. The legislation creates an authority that will approve grants to provide money to internet service providers to assist them in reaching unserved and underserved areas in the state. The bill will allow a company to ask for the difference between the amount of money that is expected on a return on investment and the money that needs to be there to make them invest. The state will be incentivizing the expansion of broadband through private companies instead of through state owned infrastructure.

The bill also provides safeguards to make sure we do not overbuild. The legislation allows a company to challenge the request for a grant if the company can show it either already provides adequate service in an area or plans to in the next two years.

The administration supports this legislation. In fact, it was the administration that helped determine the source of the \$20 million for the initial round of grants. And while this legislation does not tackle affordability, the

administration is focused on providing internet access to those that are struggling. The Department of Administrative Services released an RFI that created a transparent price list for school districts. They were able to compare costs from numerous providers and select the best option. In turn we also released the \$50 million BroadbandOhio connectivity grant which went to school districts to allow them to provide options for their students to get connected.

We support the hard work of Representatives Carfagna and O'Brien in their efforts to pass this legislation. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on behalf of this bill, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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