



Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee
House Bill 13
Proponent Testimony
November 17, 2020

Chair Wilson, Vice-Chair McColley, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on House Bill 13. We would like to thank Representative Carfagna and Representative O'Brien for their work and diligence on House Bill 13.

By way of background, the Ohio Rural Development Alliance (ORDA) is an organization of Ohio's Rural Transportation Planning Organizations and other entities dedicated to economic parity for Ohio's rural communities. ORDA's members advocate for policies that create sustainable and diverse economic growth and prosperity in their communities. One of our goals is to ensure that Ohio is positioned to capitalize on opportunities in the regional economy. Specifically, ORDA works on legislative and policy changes to ensure broadband access to 100% of the unserved areas because it will provide economic opportunities to rural Ohio communities. ORDA supports and advocates for the three policy recommendations below.

1. Create a state broadband fund that ensures sufficient resources are available.
2. Create a diverse statewide task force of experts to develop recommendations on how to close the rural-urban divide on broadband access.
3. Seek a streamlined right-of-way approval process for broadband fiber installation.

House Bill 13 fulfills the first guiding principle. ORDA believes House Bill 13 creates another mechanism to help rural communities receive access to broadband. ORDA appreciates the recent changes to the bill, which includes increasing the speed required on the definition of broadband service. Many communities may have access to what is often slow and clunky internet, but customers still are unable to utilize it properly to download items for their child's homework, access work from home platforms or stream telehealth services - all activities that households are attempting now during the current the pandemic. Many schools in rural Ohio provided paper packets for students' families to pick up each week because they could not provide instruction over a streaming service to those students due to the lack of internet in students' homes. The current pandemic has intensified inequity across the state and will only harm certain communities more in the future as the challenges of the persist.

ORDA also supports House Bill 13 because it requires the application for the program grant to include the residential addresses in unserved areas, where service will be available following the completion of the project. Many federal grant programs only require census blocks to be labeled



as served rather than the individual addresses. This creates the illusion that an entire region is served when many of the households remain a broadband desert. ORDA believes it is important for mapping purposes to know which households have access because it paints a clearer picture of the access disparity in rural Ohio.

ORDA supports the amendment that places control of the program with the Development Services Agency (DSA), instead of the Department of Commerce. DSA is experienced in facilitating grant programs in Ohio. DSA's knowledge will create the groundwork for the program to be successful.

ORDA also supports the opportunity for rural electric cooperatives to be internet service providers under House Bill 13. Rural electric cooperatives are invested in the communities they serve. With this financial investment, the rural electric cooperatives understand the broadband access in their regions and may be the best provider for certain areas.

Additionally, ORDA believes internet service providers should have access to easements of electric distribution utilities similar to the bill's language regarding open access to electric cooperatives' easements. Along with easement access, pole access allows internet service providers to reach new areas of the state more economically without having to build their own physical infrastructure. Access to electric distribution utilities poles should be included in House Bill 13. The bill already requires nondiscriminatory access to electric cooperatives poles and that the access be for reasonable rates, terms and conditions. These same principles should apply when an internet service provider wants access to electric distribution utilities' poles.

Finally, ORDA believes an innovative regional approach is another important resource fix to the lack of broadband in rural Ohio. ORDA continues to have conversations with its members and its members' communities to understand how rural Ohio is coming together to find regional solutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written proponent testimony on House Bill 13. We urge for favorable passage of House Bill 13. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to us via phone or e-mail.