



Stu Johnson, Executive Director

Proponent Testimony for House Bill 281

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Chairman Smith, Vice Chair Ryan, Ranking Member Cera, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today on House Bill 281 and to share why widespread broadband access is critical to our state and its residents.

As Executive Director of Connect Ohio, a nonprofit subsidiary of national nonprofit, Connected Nation, whose mission is to expand broadband access, adoption, and use throughout the U.S., I have talked and interacted with those who are directly impacted by lack of broadband access. They are feeling frustrated, isolated, and even forgotten.

Sometimes the “digital divide” in a community is so stark that there is truly no access. In other communities, broadband is technically available, but not at speeds that make use of the technology viable, even for personal consumption. And then there are other times in which the technology in one area has simply not caught up to neighboring communities. It is this last particular circumstance that House Bill 281 seeks to address.

I have been in both urban and rural Ohio communities working to bring connectivity to people. I’ve talked with parents, seniors, farmers, students, and many others. I personally work and am raising my family here and can say with sincerity that I do not know what my three teenage daughters would do without at-home broadband access.

I’m sure that many of you on this committee have been contacted by those you serve who lack broadband access. House Bill 281 would begin to fill some of the gaps by creating a targeted residential broadband expansion program within the Development Services Agency that will award matching grants for last mile broadband infrastructure expansion to clusters of households that lack access.

Those of us at Connected Nation have worked in this industry for nearly two decades and that experience has taught us that the deployment of broadband infrastructure to difficult-to-serve areas can indeed be costly. Frequently the most successful broadband expansion projects bring together the public and private sectors, similar to H.B. 281.

Imagine your kids not being able to do their homework or apply to one of our great state colleges, simply because you don’t have broadband at home. Imagine being a parent who can’t afford childcare, but also can’t work from home due to insufficient broadband connectivity. Or, imagine being a senior citizen who can’t access their medical records or even connect with family because of a lack of broadband. Families across the state struggle because they do not have access to the opportunities, and more and more, the necessities that are made available through high-speed broadband access.

For these reasons, and so many others, I encourage this committee to support House Bill 281 and look forward to the day that every Ohioan is part of a Connected Nation.

Thank you, Chairman Smith and members of the committee, for allowing me this time to share my testimony. I’ll be glad to answer any questions you may have at this time.