



Proponent Testimony Ohio House Finance Committee

February 9th, 2021

Good Morning Chairman Oelslager, and members of the House Finance Committee. My name is Jim Kinnick, Executive Director of Eastgate Regional Council of Governments. I am offering proponent testimony for the current version of House Bill 2.

Broadband is an essential utility for 21st-century commerce, education, and healthcare. Yet, more than a million Ohioans lack access to reliable high-speed internet. A staggering 567,000 households, almost 1 in 8, have no internet access at all, contrary to the overstated coverage claims in FCC maps. COVID-19 has worsened the problem, casting new light on how lack of access aggravates economic inequality. Eighty percent of unserved rural households are in the hard-to-reach, rugged terrain of Appalachian Ohio. At the same time, 32% of households in Ohio's nine largest urban cores lack basic internet subscriptions. Low-income households in both urban and rural settings are even less likely than their peers to have internet access, compounding the deficits among these populations. Furthermore, even Ohio households with service often endure connectivity speeds too low and connectivity too unreliable to adequately support distance learning, remote work, and modern industry operations. Addressing digital inclusion and closing the digital divide in Ohio requires meaningful financial resources and collaboration among all levels of government working in partnership with providers and communities.

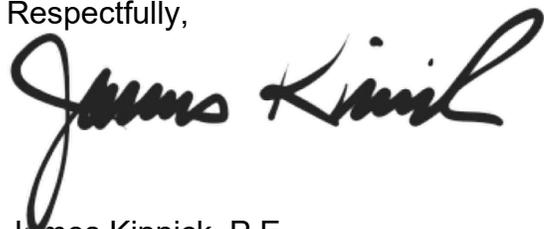
House Bill 2 provides a solid framework to begin to address the gap in access for those 567,000 households. Through two application periods each year, private companies can submit proposals to the Department of Commerce to address the broadband needs of a specific location. These areas of need may be identified by a board of county commissioners, on behalf of a township or municipality in their jurisdiction, and then publicized by the Department of Commerce. The applications will be reviewed by a dedicated Broadband Expansion Program Authority inside the Department of Commerce using a weighted scoring system to award the state funds requested by the applicant to make a specific project economically viable. This process encourages leaders at all levels of government to work with private sector providers to identify solutions that address the needs of the community while supporting economic growth.

The Eastgate Regional Council of Governments urges passage of House Bill 2. It will kick-start the process to bring high-speed internet access to 567,000 households in need of that access.

Technology continues to play a significant role in our daily life and access to that technology will create a brighter economic future not just for this region, but for all of Ohio.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Kinnick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and "K".

James Kinnick, P.E.

Executive Director