

Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee

Senate Bill 8

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Interested Party Testimony

February 9, 2021

Chair Peterson, Vice-Chair Schuring, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on Senate Bill 8.

Ohio's Electric Cooperatives is the statewide association representing 24 Ohio-based not-for-profit electric distribution cooperatives. Electric co-ops provide at-cost reliable, affordable power to roughly one million Ohioans in parts of 77 counties. Governed by boards of locally elected trustees, co-ops provide electric service to many homes, schools, businesses in some of the most rural parts of Ohio.

As much as anyone, we understand the real hurdles faced by communities, homes, and businesses who lack access to reliable high-speed internet. For many the ongoing pandemic has brought these issues to light, but for rural Ohio, these frustrations have been ongoing for nearly two decades.

The lack of reliable high-speed internet leaves our communities behind. They struggle to attract and retain businesses. Kids who attend college do not move back home due to the lack of access to reliable high-speed internet. Rural students fall behind their peers who can learn and research from home instead of the local library or McDonalds. The people who live in rural Ohio already face fewer healthcare choices, and while telemedicine should help solve that problem, a lack of reliable high-speed internet creates another false hope.

Ohio's Electric Cooperatives support efforts to spur the development of reliable high-speed internet in unserved areas through the creation of a state-wide grant program to help make projects more affordable. While few co-ops in Ohio are equipped to become retail internet providers, co-ops do have the existing infrastructure and are committed to fostering partnerships to make broadband deployment a reality in the areas they serve. Co-ops are supportive of allowing all internet providers access to existing utility

easements and are committed to allowing fair and equitable pole access to any internet provider.

Language added during the process last General Assembly created a new process for regulating the way providers are given access to utility poles owned by electric cooperatives. For years co-ops and providers have worked together to ensure access as telephones became the backbone of communication. As at-cost providers, electric cooperatives do not earn a profit and return margins back to their members in the form of capital credits. It is because of this model that we continue to caution the General Assembly about changes to pole attachment rates that force our electric customers to subsidize for-profit corporate providers through one-size-fits-all formulas created in Washington, DC.

We appreciate the efforts of Senator McColley to improve the process to regulate these attachment agreements to ensure that cooperatives will have the ability to defend their ability to fully recover costs through courts of common pleas.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on Senate Bill 8.