

House Consumer Affairs Committee
Telecommunications Subcommittee
Testimony on Broadband Access
Pennsylvania State Grange
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Thank you very much for receiving this written testimony from the Pennsylvania State Grange.

Pennsylvania State Grange has represented rural Pennsylvanians, both farmers and others, since 1873. Currently, we are pushing for universal access to Broadband for rural Pennsylvania as our number one priority. **To understand this issue fully, consider a comparison between rural electrification in the 20th Century and Broadband access today.** The Pennsylvania State Grange believes that right now, many in Pennsylvania do not have access to what has become basic access to technology.

Rural electrification was a concerted effort devoting public resources to build the infrastructure. Sadly, that money pot is not there now, at least not on the state level. Even though the State Budget for the upcoming fiscal year is cautiously optimistic, whatever that could be found in the State Budget will not be enough.

Face it. There is no Marshall Plan for Broadband and no pockets deep enough to underwrite a comprehensive strategy. So, there is a different approach.

Instead of a huge bucket of money and an omnibus Marshall Plan for universal access to Broadband, the General Assembly has had to devise lower cost strategies to get the job done. That means numerous pieces of legislation, each of which attacks part of the problem.

Here are two examples supported by the Pennsylvania State Grange.

House Bill 305, Printer's Number 1737

House Bill 305 is sponsored by Rep. Pam Snyder (D-Fayette/Washington/Greene). It directs the PA Department of General Services to inventory state-owned structures that might also provide an opportunity for Broadband expansion. For example, if there is a taller structure, why not “piggyback” it so that the structure has multiple uses? One benefit of this legislation is that telecommunications companies that join with the Commonwealth in a public-partnership will pay leasing fees. That is a win-win. Citizens benefit because of increased access. The Commonwealth gets new revenue.

I note that the bill was favorably reported by the House State Government Committee unanimously on May 6, 2019. It is great to see bipartisan cooperation to reach a common goal. Hopefully, the full House will take up House Bill 305 imminently.

Small Cell Facility Installation

We assume that legislation sponsored by Telecommunications Subcommittee Chair Representative Frank Farry from Bucks County will be reintroduced (last session's House Bill 2564).

The Pennsylvania State Grange testified before this committee last session on August 9, 2018 and appreciates this opportunity to do it again. This legislation seeks to create a uniform standard for Small Cell Facilities' installation. Having a standard means that telecommunications companies would not have to face conflicting municipal requirements.

This legislation reduces the costs of expanding access by reducing installation expense or at least allowing for cost predictability. Put another way, this bill is a facilitator.

Although much attention has focused on underserved rural parts of the Commonwealth by the Pennsylvania State Grange and others, lack of access to Broadband applies to urban areas as well. I have spoken with urban legislators who tell me that there are significant pockets in their districts where there is no or very poor reception. Rep. Farry's proposal fits that urban need. One of the small-scale facilities might cover ten or twenty square blocks.

By itself, it will not solve everyone's problem. But it is not designed for that. It is a targeted approach to meet specific smaller scale situations.

Some municipalities may be concerned about ceding authority to the state. Any perceived loss of authority at the local level is understandable. However, there were explicit provisions in last year's legislation that preserve local government authority over zoning and land use.

National Grange President Betsy Huber is from Pennsylvania's Chester County. Germane to this hearing, she also serves as the rural representative on a Federal Communications Commission special committee focusing on Broadband access and expansion. She tells me that the FCC is also looking at this approach –to develop universal guidance standards for installation of small cell facilities. The FCC work speaks to the same need addressed by Rep. Farry's legislation.

Conclusion

Given the lack of financial resources, Pennsylvania should try multiple approaches, each one of which is incremental, addressing a specific way to expand Broadband access.

Given our fiscal limitations, a viable option is to try many targeted approaches. Each could address a part of the need. Creation of the PA Office of Broadband Initiatives by Governor Wolf spurred PennDOT's \$35 million re-allocation of existing dollars to "wire" some of PA's roadways compatible with self-driving vehicles, for example, could have a spin-off effect to promote economic investment along those corridors such as PA's Route 6 along the Northern Tier.

In this scenario, a variety of approaches would collectively take hold. Some would work in some areas and not in others. Granted, it is a piecemeal approach instead of a centrally funded omnibus campaign which we might do if the money was there. Each of these smaller parts can play a role. But, they add up.