

House Consumer Affairs Committee
Testimony on Rural Broadband
Pennsylvania State Grange
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Majority Chair Marshall, Minority Chair Matzie and Members of the House Consumer Affairs Committee, thank you for holding this hearing on expansion of high-speed Broadband in Pennsylvania.

For the record, I am Wayne Campbell, President of the Pennsylvania State Grange. As you may know, the Pennsylvania State Grange is one of, if not the oldest organization that advocates for rural Pennsylvanians, having been founded in 1873.

I am sorry I am unable to be present but wish to commend you for your focus on this urgent need.

Universal access to high-speed Broadband is our top legislative priority.

The House Consumer Affairs Committee is in a unique place. This committee is at the center of what will happen to Broadband legislation now.

The Senate Communications & Technology Committee has acted on four Broadband bills this legislative session. One of them was House Bill 1621 with Consumer Affairs Committee Chair Jim Marshall as its prime sponsor. This seeks to standardize municipal requirements for installing small cell facilities on utility poles. It was signed into law as Act 50 of 2021 as the first Broadband bill to complete the legislative gauntlet this session.

Pennsylvania State Grange supported both this legislation and similar legislation introduced in the 2019-20 legislative session by Consumer Affairs Committee member Frank Farry.

The other three bills from the Senate Communications & Technology Committee are:

- **Senate Bill 769** which is the Senate companion to House Bill 1621 (Act 50).
- **Senate Bill 341** to reduce some of PUC regulatory authority over rural telephone companies seeking to offer Broadband to their customers. It is now in the House Consumer Affairs Committee.
- **Senate Bill 442** mandates that the state inventory its structures to identify those which could allow “piggybacking” of telecommunications equipment to reach Pennsylvanians in rural areas. Similar to last session’s House Bill 305 which passed the House, SB 442 received a 23-2 favorable vote by the House Consumer Affairs Committee on June 15. It is now in the House Appropriations Committee.

These bills are supported by the Pennsylvania State Grange.

In addition to SB 341, Senate Bill 442, and HB 1621 (Act 50), the House Consumer Affairs Committee has five additional bills.

Three of these bills take care of unfinished Broadband business.

Some recent history:

- Governor Tom Wolf created the Governor's Office of Broadband Initiatives. Problem is, there was no dedicated staff except for one person who still had to work on DCED matters. There was no budget. To her credit, the Office's director did yeoman service and negotiated a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission but she was literally hamstrung in being able to fully have that Office reach its potential.
- On November 25, 2020, Governor Wolf signed Senate Bill 835 into law as Act 132 of 2020. This legislation converted a tax credit program into money that could be used to grant money for Broadband development. It was authorized to spend \$5 million. Authorization is not actual ability to spend.
- This year, the final State Budget included actual money (\$5 million) so that Act 132 could be more than words on paper.
- However, \$5 million dollars is a drop in the proverbial bucket relative to the need.

What is needed is an infrastructure to coordinate grants and seek other grants.

Three bills do that.

House Bill 1075, sponsored by Consumer Affairs Committee member Pam Snyder, establishes the Broadband Authority. It would be the coordinating mechanism for Broadband development to unserved areas. That Authority includes recommendations from a Joint State Government Commission advisory group as a basis. The Pennsylvania State Grange was honored to be appointed as the only rural membership group in this effort.

House Bill 1766 sponsored by Rep. Martin Causer provides \$100 million in Federal stimulus dollars to fund Broadband development administered by the Commonwealth Financing Authority.

House Bill 1742 sponsored by Rep. Snyder would dedicate \$500 million of Federal stimulus money for that purpose.

The other two bills are:

- **House Bill 956** sponsored by Rep. Jason Ortity sets up a county framework to financially assist individuals currently without high-speed Broadband service to offset the high cost of extending Broadband to less populated areas. This would be funded by anticipated Federal Broadband dollars.
- **House Bill 1042** sponsored by Rep. Perry Stambaugh increases minimum mandated speeds.

Conclusion

Any progress in achieving universal access to high-speed Broadband comes through the House Consumer Affairs Committee. Given the harm to education, health care, business growth, and farming from being on the wrong side of the Digital Divide, rural PA looks to you to act decisively on Broadband legislation this fall.

Please accept this challenge. The future of rural Broadband is in your hands. Having this hearing is an important step and we appreciate the opportunity to offer this testimony. It lays the groundwork for committee action. The Pennsylvania State Grange looks forward to working with the House Consumer Affairs Committee to make this happen and be a productive session benefitting all of Pennsylvania.