

Senate Communications & Technology Committee

Testimony on Broadband Access

Lemont Furnace, PA

Pennsylvania State Grange

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Chairs Kristin Phillips-Hill and Steven Santarsiero, and members of the Senate Communications & Technology Committee:

Thank you very much for having the Pennsylvania State Grange testify. We are frankly delighted to see the Senate focusing on this important issue.

Pennsylvania State Grange has represented rural Pennsylvanians, both farmers and others, since 1873. Currently, we are pushing for universal access to high-speed Broadband for rural Pennsylvania as our number one legislative priority. To understand this issue fully, we need to go back to the early days of the last century before rural electrification described in the 2018 book, Century of Innovation.

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Successful at building plants to service large concentrated markets, builders of power generation facilities in the first third of the century made relatively limited forays into rural America, where scattered farm families were isolated by distance from urban generating plants. As the inhabitants of New York, Chicago, and other cities across the country enjoyed the gleaming lights and the new labor-saving devices powered by electricity, life in rural America remained difficult. On 90 percent of American farms the only artificial light came from smoky and smelly lamps. Water had to be pumped by hand and heated over wood-burning stoves. Virtually every chore required manual labor.

(<http://www.greatachievements.org/?id=2988>)

What transformed rural America to give it electrical equity with urban areas was a concerted effort by government, the private sector and especially the formation of rural electrical cooperatives. Rural electrification allowed rural America to fully be a part of the American economic miracle and helped to end the isolation and sense of exclusion.

Pre-rural electrification, rural America was at a disadvantage compared to urban areas. It is hard to compete with someone when they have electricity and you do not. It is harder to learn in an environment without electricity. Yes, Abe Lincoln studied by candlelight and he did well BUT in the 1930s, lack of access to electricity posed problems to rural students who did not have as desirable a learning environment as those students living in areas where electricity is present.

Broadband access is to this century what rural electrification was to the 20th Century.

Fast Forward to the Present

Like the comic said, “It’s déjà vu all over again”.

Today, rural Pennsylvania does not have the tools necessary to be on a par with the rest of the state. Look at the digital divide:

- **EDUCATION**

Most schools utilize the Internet extensively as a resource for learning. Access to information by computer is certainly faster and more efficient. Thanks to technology, there is an entire world of resources literally at a student's keyboard. BUT these resources are unavailable to those without access to high-speed Broadband. Senator Phillips-Hill spoke at a panel discussion the Pennsylvania State Grange convened at the Farm Show. She said that one thing prompting her interest in this issue were parents telling her that they had to drive their kids to school parking lots so that Internet-based homework could be completed.

If you believe that our children are the resource for tomorrow, why does a big part of our student population simply lose out when they cannot use technology that others routinely take for granted.

Here is a current education example:

In 2019, the General Assembly passed Act 64 (Senate Bill 440) addressing flexible instructional days such as snow days where the weather means that schools are closed. Schools could assign homework to be completed electronically. That is all well and good if you have access to the Internet. If not, you are at home and when you come back to class, you are behind those kids who could do their assignments.

The legislation specifies that school districts must provide digital access to technology to students with no or little Broadband access. The law is clearly an attempt to address the lack but workability is an issue since the school district may not have the resources to provide Internet access. Act 64 has the right idea but will only achieve partial success unless there is a concerted effort at the state level to make universal access to high-speed Broadband a reality.

Moving into higher education and the workforce, rural students will simply not be as prepared compared to others who have had access to Broadband resources.

- **COMMERCE**

Technology is supposed to make business more effective but if you don't have access to high-speed Internet, where does that leave you?

Licensing and state permitting are now done mostly online.

Billing and order taking and processing are done online. An example is a campground operation which depends on Internet registration and Internet verification that the credit card is good.

If it is true that we live in a global market, those businesses with connectivity capture that market. Those without Broadband are left behind.

Why would a business choose a rural location without access to high-speed Broadband? Economic development is dependent on a dedicated workforce which we have. PA has transportation

connections to East coast markets. These are great incentives to invest but one thing is lacking. Of course there are other variables influencing a business decision to locate such as improving Pennsylvania's tax climate. . The point I am making is that rural areas without access to high-speed Broadband will not attract business investment. Broadband is a core resource necessary for economic development to increase in rural PA.

Will a business choose **a place to invest with full access to technology** where it can do all the things a business must do...market, take, process and fulfill orders, negotiate with suppliers...or will it choose a rural area where insufficient or no access exists?

- **FARMING**

Farming today is not like farming before. Equipment is more sophisticated and therefore more efficient. Consider a piece of farm equipment that “remembers” areas where more or less fertilizer is needed and then applies the correct amount. Controlling operating costs are central to a farmer's survival and technology reduces those costs – if you have access to that technology.

In today's world, runoff containing fertilizers and herbicides are a concern to everyone. The “Smart Farm Equipment” of today can help reduce this runoff and increase a farmer's bottom line – but only if the farmer has access to the Internet.

In addition, some pieces of farm equipment have self diagnostics to alert farmers and manufacturers when the equipment has a mechanical issue or needs a certain type of maintenance. This automated process is great in that maintenance costs go down and small problems are resolved with early warnings versus coping with more expensive issues later on. A farmer not having access to that technology means that he or she is left half blind.

More farms are gaining access to the Internet, smart phones, etc. and that is good news. Problem is that PA farmers lag behind the Nation. If Agriculture is our Number One industry, policymakers should consider access to high-speed Broadband as critical to the future vitality of this critical industry in our state.

Please note the August 23, 2019 report from USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service showing an improvement in PA to 64% of farmers having Internet access, this year, up from 62% in 2017. Nationally, 75% of farmers have access to the Internet. Disturbing is that only 39% of PA farmers use a smart phone or tablet – Can you imagine running a business without being able to utilize this technology. The NASS release follows:



NEWS RELEASE

United States Department of Agriculture

NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS SERVICE

NORTHEASTERN REGIONAL FIELD OFFICE

4050 Crums Mill Rd, Harrisburg PA 17112

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: King Whetstone

August 23, 2019

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Farms with Internet Access Up in Pennsylvania

HARRISBURG, PA - - Farms with internet access in Pennsylvania increased to 64 percent in 2019, compared to 62 percent reported in 2017 according to King Whetstone, director of USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, Northeastern Region. Sixty-six percent of farms also reported having access to a desktop or laptop computer. Farms that used a desktop or laptop computer to conduct farm business remained at 40 percent, the same as 2017. Thirty-nine percent of the farms in Pennsylvania used a smart phone or tablet to conduct farm business, compared with 35 percent in 2017.

In 2019, thirty-nine percent of farms in Pennsylvania used a Digital Subscriber Line, or DSL, and 30 percent of farms used cable to access the internet. Since 2017, DSL and cable continue to be the most popular choices that Pennsylvania farms use to access the internet.

Nationally, 75 percent of farms reported having access to the internet, with 73 percent of farms having access to a desktop or laptop computer. The 2019 computer usage estimates are based on responses from more than 20,000 agricultural operations, and represent all sizes and types of farms.

- **HEALTH**

A fact of rural life is difficulties in receiving health care. With fewer people, there are fewer health care providers per capita. There are fewer hospitals and they struggle because revenue does not keep pace with expenses. These days, some of the strategies to increase availability of health care involve telemedicine. Rather than require travel of in some cases hours, remote monitoring can advise health care providers of problems with devices such as a pacemaker. Telemedicine means that counseling can take place over a computer. Telemedicine is seen as a way to stretch resources to serve the rural population.

However, telemedicine does not work if there is no connectivity. Remote monitoring of a health condition? No. The doctor reviewing a condition with a patient communicating real-time data? No.

Pennsylvania State Grange understands the importance of telemedicine but it doesn't work when there is no access to high-speed Broadband. As you may know, the Federal Government is funding a pilot rural hospital program for five rural hospitals in the Commonwealth. A big part of this program is community outreach using technology. Without Broadband access, how will that goal be achieved?

It's a little like the TV commercial where a woman falls and pressing a button she wears, tells an operator miles away, "Help! I have fallen and can't get up." Now picture the same scene where the woman has fallen and there is no 'magic' button.

Conclusion

We have seen some progress but face it, Pennsylvania is behind.

The Pennsylvania State Grange is encouraged by recent legislative progress with Senate Resolution 47 (Commission), Senate Resolution 48 (making sure that telecommunications firms meet their existing Broadband obligations).

House Bill 305 directs PA to inventory structures that it owns to determine which ones can be "piggybacked" by telecommunications companies and then leases the use of those structures. It passed the House and is now in the Senate State Government Committee.

I note that Senators Kristin Phillips-Hill and Pat Stefano are members of this committee who also serve on the Senate State Government Committee. The Pennsylvania State Grange hopes that you will talk with State Government Committee Chair Mike Folmer to request action on HB 305.

The good news right now is that policymakers in PA are more aware of the problem and are beginning to consider ways to remedy this inequity in our society where some have access to the technology so necessary in today's society and where many in rural PA are simply left behind.

This spring and early summer, the General Assembly showed that it can be involved in issues affecting rural Pennsylvania as shown by enactment of the Farming First initiative and the PA Farm Bill. That is encouraging but the next step has to be taken – universal access to high-speed Broadband.

We appreciate the work of the Senate Communications & Technology Committee in helping Pennsylvania bridge the technological divide. Back in the 1930s, rural electrification was seen as an almost insurmountable challenge just as Broadband is today. America solved that problem and we will have to solve this one as well. Thanks to this committee, we appear to be on our way.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present this testimony to you today on behalf of the Pennsylvania State Grange.