



**THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE ASSOCIATION OF
TOWNSHIP SUPERVISORS**

**PROVIDING COMMENTS TO
SENATE COMMUNICATIONS & TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE**

ON

BROADBAND ACCESS

BY

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Madame Chairman, and members of the Senate Communications and Technology Committee, and our host Senator Pittman:

Good morning, my name is Joe Gerdes and I am the Director of Government Relations for the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on behalf of the 1,454 townships in Pennsylvania represented by the Association on this critical issue of broadband access.

The Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors (PSATS) is a non-partisan, nonprofit member service organization. Member townships represent 5.6 million Pennsylvanians —more residents than any other type of PA municipal government and cover 95 percent of the commonwealth's land mass. These townships are very diverse, ranging from rural, agricultural communities with fewer than 200 residents to more suburban, populated communities with populations approaching 65,000 residents.

The commonwealth, its local governments, telecommunications providers, business' including agriculture, and all of our fellow citizens have a huge stake in reliable, high-speed internet access. This infrastructure superhighway of the future is needed for Pennsylvania to deliver 22nd Century economic development, education, and healthcare. Safe and effective deployment in all of our communities will greatly enhance public safety and overall quality of life. Our collective efforts to provide this access will ensure that all our residents, new and long standing, have great places to live, work and raise families.

The FCC estimates that 800,000 Pennsylvania residents lack access to high-speed internet, with two thirds residing in rural areas. The problem with this statistic is that it is self-reported by the carriers. In reality, millions don't have the capacity needed to be competitive socially, economically, or academically now or in the future. Recent studies suggest these numbers may be severely underestimated and further suggest that half the population of each county in Pennsylvania lacks adequate broadband service, which the FCC defines as 25 megabits per second for downloads and 3Mbps for uploads. In fact, no Pennsylvania county averages 25/3 Mbps.

First and foremost, this lack of broadband access is a public safety issue. The inability to harness real time information and technologies to address situations and threats to the public should be our primary concern. The FirstNet initiative is making great strides to ensure communication for first responders, and we applaud the work done on this and ask for your help to see it through completion. There are other areas such as traffic information and real time road updates which also have a public safety component to them as well. Not to mention, this broadband infrastructure will also play a crucial role in the development of autonomous vehicles, which we know are coming, to safely transport people and goods throughout all of our communities.

The lack of access also has some very real implications on commerce and quality of life. Much of Pennsylvania will be hobbled in its ability to attract new businesses or retain existing businesses. Small business owners and farmers will be uncompetitive missing out on efficiencies that technology may make available to them. Students will not be able to access

educational opportunities, complete homework, or attend classes on a snowy day. Putting them at a distinct disadvantage from their peers that have better access. The inability of healthcare facilities to share important life-saving data or use modern medical advancements in patient diagnosis and treatment will put some people at risk especially in areas which may already be medically underserved. Local governments themselves are also hindered from this lack of service. As the Federal and State governments require more, if not all, documents to be submitted electronically, local governments like townships sometimes have to go to great lengths to access vital services and revenues. And from the constituent's perspective, they want the ability to pay their bills online, watch local meetings, and monitor local road and bridge projects.

Some have compared the task of bringing broadband access to every Pennsylvanian to the challenge of bringing electricity to all Pennsylvanians not even a hundred years ago. Just imagine where we would be if we had not accepted that challenge then. Indeed, we are at a similar juncture in Pennsylvania today which will have a profound impact on the futures of many of our fellow citizens.

We are encouraged by this committee's attention and resolve to bring this issue before your colleagues and for the Governor's commitment to this effort with the creation of the Office of Broadband Initiatives and setting a target date of 2022 to provide all Pennsylvanians with broadband coverage. Madame chairman, your Senate Bill 470 to complete an inventory of state assets available to assist in deployment is so important as we assess the feasibility of providing service and the barriers and gaps in areas where we need improve. Given the geography and topography of our state, its likely we will need a combination of fiber, wire, wireless, and satellite to get the job done. Knowing what assets public and private entities bring to the table will help with the speed of deployment and avoid costly duplication.

The townships understand their important role in this deployment with their physical assets, local expertise and services. We simply ask that the burden not be passed onto them and in turn the local taxpayers in the form of unfunded mandates or not being able to receive appropriate reimbursements for services. As you well know, our townships provide vital services to their constituents and try to do so in a way which doesn't overly burden the tax payer and we welcome innovative ideas and partnerships to help provide affordable, safe and dependable broadband service.

To that end, we like seeing local communities and leaders step up to help move us closer to our shared goal. Efforts like that of the Central Bradford Progress Authority, using Act 13 and grant money to fund an \$11 million three phase fiber installation, SEDA-COG's pilot initiative to partner with service providers to open access to the county communication towers of their 11 member counties. And like they did with electricity, some of Pennsylvania's Rural Electric Cooperatives are stepping up to provide broadband service to their customers. These projects and partnerships are important steps to close the so-called digital divide.

All levels of government local, state, and federal must also work together with the private sector to help close the divide. A task this big may be unobtainable if we do not. We simply cannot allow for any of our fellow Pennsylvanians to be left behind. The Pennsylvania State

Association of Township Supervisors will continue to work with you all to accomplish this goal of safe and efficient deployment of both wired and wireless broadband services to all Pennsylvanians. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide you with our comments.