



OREGON STATE SENATE
900 COURT ST. NE, S-417
SALEM, OR 97301

Dear Co-Chairs Kotek and Courtney, Co-Vice Chairs Girod and Drazan and Members of the Joint Interim Committee on the First Special Session of 2020:

In response to COVID-19, the state ordered the closing of schools and businesses, and instructed non-essential employees to work from home. Unfortunately, for many, working from home required one essential service – broadband connectivity. Rural broadband would help conquer the unequal digital divide in the areas of internet access for schools, telehealth and business development.

As member of the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council (OBAC), we continued our work with the goal of establishing the Broadband Fund in the Oregon Business Development Department (OBDD) to aggressively meet the challenges associated with the digital divide. However, the COVID-19 pandemic created a renewed sense of urgency indicating that communities without basic accessible communication infrastructure will be left behind. As such, we cannot fail to pass LC 39.

The provisions of LC 39 – the redraft of HB 4079 - Rural Telecommunications Investment Act (RTIA) incorporate OBAC's recommendations for much needed resources to address the current crisis. LC 39 establishes Broadband Fund and directs Public Utility Commission (PUC) to transfer up to \$5 million per year of moneys deposited in universal service fund to Broadband Fund. Continuously appropriates moneys in Broadband Fund to Oregon Business Development Department (OBDD) to provide grants and loans to improve digital inclusion with preference to unserved and underserved areas of Oregon.

We understand that Federal funding is also key to broadband and internet connectivity. In its last report, OBAC recommended that the state provide funding for new grant, loan and loan guarantee programs for broadband in unserved and underserved areas of the state, and for matching funds to leverage federal funding programs in support of new broadband infrastructure, community broadband planning, digital inclusion, cyber-security, education, public safety, agriculture, and network interconnection. The COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis has illustrated the importance of this critical work.

Though the COVID-19 crisis has brought urgent attention to the state's needs relative to the digital divide, the situation and trends that make it an important public policy issue are not new to us. The passage of LC 39 would recognize that rural access to information is not equal, our ongoing need for connectivity and broadband as an essential item for communications now, and in the future.

Thanks in advance for your thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,

Senator Arnie Roblan, Oregon Senate District 5