



June 22, 2020

Co-Chair Senator Peter Courtney
Co-Chair Representative Tina Kotek
Co-Vice Chair Senator Fred Girod
Co-Vice Chair Representative Christine Drazan
Senator Ginny Burdick Senator Lew Frederick Senator Tim Knopp
Senator Floyd Prozanski Senator Kim Thatcher
Representative Janelle Bynum Representative Paul Holvey
Representative Rick Lewis Representative Andrea Salinas
Representative Duane Stark

To the Members of the Joint Interim Committee on the First Special Session of 2020:

Rural Development Initiatives (RDI) is writing to ask the members of the Joint Interim Committee to consider the immediate and pressing broadband needs of recovering rural Oregon communities as part of the First Special Session of 2020, as outlined in LC39. RDI is grateful to the members of the Joint Committee for their attention to this vitally important issue.

The pandemic has laid bare the stark inequities between urban and rural broadband service, which has adversely impacted the effectiveness of K-12 virtual education, access to healthcare in the form of potential telehealth adaptations, and teleworking and telemarketing options to help rural Oregonians maintain their livelihoods. As Oregon moves forward to recovery, the flexibility and access broadband affords those managing the effects of the pandemic are absolutely essential.

Rural economies are characterized by a high dependency on low-wage workers, inadequate access to broadband, limited access to healthcare, dilapidated facilities, and inadequate access to child care and senior services, which magnifies the negative impact of the coronavirus crisis in rural places. In our experience, if the rural impact of this unprecedented pandemic is not understood, there is the potential that Oregon's statewide leaders will, again, leave rural businesses, economies, and social services behind in policy making as they respond to this important health crisis.

Oregon's leaders have an opportunity to choose a path forward from this pandemic that creates a balance in our state and contributes to a stronger future for all Oregonians. This includes investing resources to address the specific needs of underserved rural Oregon—focusing on the disproportionate impact on indigenous communities, Blacks, and other people of color—and to develop solutions in partnership with rural people and the organizations that support them.

When RDI began, first, as the Community Initiatives Program of the Oregon Economic Development Department (1989), then later, as a private nonprofit transformed by SB713 (1992), our charge was to assist rural communities experiencing abrupt and devastating changes to their economies. For 28 years, RDI's staff has worked alongside people in Oregon's rural communities as they have grappled with ongoing economic challenges and instabilities, reimagined new economic and community building strategies, built the leadership skills needed to work together, and rolled up their sleeves to do the work.

Thank you for your timely and thoughtful service to the residents of Oregon in dealing with this unprecedented emergency.

Rurally yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Heidi Khokhar". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Heidi Khokhar
Executive Director

