



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

June 24, 2020

Joint Interim Committee on The First Special Session of 2020
SB 1603 (LC 39) Testimony from Rep Marsh:

Chair Kotek, Co-chair Courtney, members of the committee. This is Pam Marsh, House Representative from District 5 here speaking in support of SB 1603.

Over the past few months you have heard stories describing the huge gap in broadband connectivity made clear during the pandemic. Indeed, Business Oregon data indicates that more than 40% of rural residents and 20% of urban ones have either no internet or service that is well below minimal FCC standards.

The obstacle that we face in our work to get everyone on line is that the extremely capable public and private entrepreneurs who have been working in the broadband realm have already done all the easy stuff. Any place where installation makes financial sense has been connected. The tiny towns and wide swaths of landscape that remain unserved or underserved need public subsidies to make broadband infrastructure pencil out.

We've heard lots of discussion about federal money that may be heading our way via the USDA or FCC. And certainly – we should be grabbing every single dollar the federal government offers up. But to successfully compete for Oregon's share of that funding, we have to have our act together. We need a robust Broadband Office that has the expertise to help our most rural communities understand what's possible. We need dollars to spend on planning and technical assistance. And we need to have funding available when a match is required, or an opportunity presents itself.

The USDA is doing great work on broadband, but when you have a chance please review a document on the record from MINET, a broadband provider in Independence. On pages 8 and 9 you will find a list of the studies, maps, engineering work, financial materials, and professional assessments that must be completed to apply for a USDA grant. None of that preliminary work is covered by the USDA, and as the MINET analysis indicates, no small town can possibly pull an application like that together on its own.

Consider, as well, the need for matching monies. Last year, the state of Oregon left more than \$20 million federal dollars on the table because we did not provide \$2 million in matching funds for our Connecting Oregon Schools Program to get our most rural school online. At the time, that was heartbreaking; in retrospect, it's even worse. That must never happen again.

We need to make sure that the race to faster and better does not exacerbate the rural urban divide, grow our income gaps, or spur further inequities. The current crisis is a test. I urge you to pass SB 1603 so that we can get going in our efforts to ensure that the digital age leaves no Oregonian behind.