



**WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 1603
DURING THE FIRST SPECIAL SESSION OF 2020**

June 24, 2020

Dear Co-Chair Courtney, Co-Chair Kotek, and Members of the Joint Interim Committee,

Thank you very much for this opportunity to contribute further written testimony in support of Senate Bill 1603 introduced by Senator Courtney and based on an earlier bill developed by Representative Pam Marsh and her colleagues. I am writing on behalf of the organization which I lead – the Oregon Fiber Partnership, better known as Link Oregon. We urge your support of SB 1603.

Link Oregon is an Oregon-based, non-profit consortium of the state’s four public research universities (OHSU, Oregon State University, Portland State University, and University of Oregon) and the Oregon State Government through its Enterprise Information Services (formerly OSCIO). We were established last year to develop and operate a statewide, high-speed, facilities-based optical network to provide both point-to-point and advanced Internet connectivity for our members as well as for other public and non-profit entities across Oregon. We already provide this level of connectivity to Oregon’s public universities, several community colleges, and, through a partnership with the Educational School Districts, to more than 60 of the nearly 200 public school districts statewide. Our bylaws limit our scope to serving our members, and we work very closely with both private and public telecommunications providers around the state in support of our mission. An explicitly stated goal of our organization is to support the advancement of broadband initiatives in rural Oregon through the sharing of best practices, technical collaboration (e.g., local peering), and our financial investments that help incentivize providers to improve their facilities. Despite extensive efforts across Oregon by carriers, broadband service providers, and even municipal broadband initiatives, many Oregonians are still being left offline and at risk of falling behind. Oregon’s broadband infrastructure, while generally strong in the largest urban centers, is still intermittent across much of the state’s rural and most remote areas.

This need for modernization and stabilization of the state’s Universal Service Fund has been made particularly visible through the COVID-19 pandemic. The sustained closing of schools (and other public service facilities across the state) has made the gap in availability of reliable broadband Internet access to rural communities obvious and significant. This incomplete broadband infrastructure and services solution renders a significant number of Oregonians unable to access education, putting a number of students—many in lower income communities—at risk of missing out on direct learning and academic support available to their urban and suburban peers. It also limits community access to healthcare, in the form of

telehealth, as well as access to other public services. Options for many to work remotely from home are also being curtailed.

Over my career, I have had the opportunity to work on the initial development and expansion of two other state networks in the western United States – the Washington State K-20 Network and the Utah Education and Telehealth Network (UEN). I also have led the national network that connects these state networks under the auspices of the U.S. higher education non-profit organization, Internet2. In these previous roles, I have seen first-hand the power of a coordinated, statewide educational networking platform to deliver advanced curriculum and testing capabilities to smaller school districts and to provide unique educational opportunities otherwise unavailable to students in rural settings. At this time, I feel particularly honored to have the opportunity to lead a team and to serve a Board of Directors strongly committed to delivering similar capabilities to Oregon’s public and non-profit sectors, particularly in support of students who are being adversely impacted academically by the pandemic.

I will add several observations from my extended involvement with UEN (Advisory Group and Board membership between 2008 and 2015). In Utah, I witnessed the positive benefits of a strong, visible partnership between the state public network and the state broadband office. In addition, as a public network, UEN regularly shared its technology insights, progress, and performance data at public meetings of the state broadband advisory council.

The recent formation of the State Broadband Office under Business Oregon and the growth in support for the Link Oregon network are excellent indicators of the recognition of need for establishing a similar mutually beneficial framework in Oregon focusing on advancing broadband access for the all people of Oregon, but especially for those communities that lack equitable access to reliable educational services and public information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the most recent data from the Oregon Department of Education, 12 Oregon school districts funded during fiscal year 2019 were able to pursue projects valued at \$26.37 million utilizing a combination of E-Rate discounting and FCC matching funding and leveraging \$2.18 million in State match. The bottom line is that leveraging available federal funding enabled the delivery of projects benefiting Oregon’s K-12 students worth *over 12 times the State’s investment*.

Even with this demonstrated success, we have long felt that Oregon’s institutions were not as well positioned as they could be to leverage the existing federal broadband funding opportunities, such as the FCC E-rate program for K-12 and community broadband programs in the U.S. Departments of Agriculture (Rural Development) and Commerce (National Telecommunications and Information Administration). Specifically, Oregon needs a sustainable funding mechanism to adequately leverage the billions of dollars in federal funding that are

available. Frankly, Oregon has not been positioned well to garner its full fair share—particularly during this pandemic, when the potential for impact of having or lacking broadband is so great.

Both the short-term goal to mitigate the impact of poor broadband access, particularly if a renewed wave of the pandemic forces extended distancing for the next academic year, and the longer-term goal of ensuring sustainable economic recovery and resilience over the next several years will require extensive improvements to the state's broadband infrastructure.

The limited funding that this legislation would provide (no more than \$5 million) still will serve as critical seed funding for the state Broadband Fund. In turn, this Fund will provide matching funds for rural school districts and rural communities as they seek and obtain federal broadband funding. This fund should be viewed as a long-term investment that can be matched by the proportionately much larger federal funding that is available.

During my two years in this leadership position, I have traveled the state extensively (visiting all but one county to date). In rural communities in eastern and southern Oregon, such as John Day, Chiloquin, Burns, and Lakeview, I have witnessed the cumulative effects of broadband deficiency on the quality of education and healthcare and prospects for economic development, further exacerbated by the pandemic. In conversations with former commissioner Ken Kestner and his fellow broadband champions in Lake County, I came to understand the broadband vulnerability that this community currently feels. Its connectivity depends on a single fiber path from Klamath Falls that is at risk of fiber disruption and other system failures.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of SB 1603.

Sincerely,



Steven Corbató
Executive Director