TESTIMONY OF CHERI RHINHART
OREGON BROADBAND ADVISORY COUNCIL

Before the House Committee on Sustainability and Economic Development

Wednesday, February 17, 2021

Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Cheri Rhinhart, Director of Information Technology at InterMountain E.S.D, and a member of the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this informational Hearing to provide testimony from the perspective of the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council representing Oregon K-12 education.

I have provided written testimony for your reference.

In 2021, having broadband internet at school and at home is no longer a nice-to-have option, but an essential prerequisite in a digital age, especially for academic success. Some Oregon communities remain unserved, and many others are underserved, suffering slow, unreliable connectivity. Oregon has a responsibility to ensure **Anywhere, Anytime, Always On, Affordable** broadband.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically renewed the focus on the importance of connectivity for digital learning and remote working as Oregon K-12 engaged in Comprehensive Distance Learning for all. It also further exposed the lack of broadband connectivity in Oregon homes that creates the "Homework Gap." This gap unfairly impacts students from rural areas, low-income homes, and urban neighborhoods from an equal opportunity to succeed.

Umatilla School District surveyed all households with school-age children and found that approximately one-quarter had either no access or restricted access to internet. A similar survey conducted by Stanfield School District found that about ten percent of students are without internet access and five percent of those who do are limited to access via smartphone. Just as problematic, about ten percent of the teaching staff are without internet access at home. No student should fall behind their peers because they lack adequate broadband at school, or home. Even a family fortunate enough to have a reliable connection and accessibility to technology devices at home, are now being taxed for broadband due to multiple household members learning and working from home.

Whether online, in-person, or hybrid, digital learning platforms require adequate connectivity. Digital information technologies and distance learning will continue to play an integral and growing role in education going forward, and the challenges we are facing will not end with the pandemic.

Heidi Sipe, Superintendent of Umatilla School District who was unable to join us today adds.

"As we look beyond COVID and begin to reimagine education, some elements of pandemic learning must remain. Students and families should continue to have choices in learning modality, and we must continue to provide support for technology and network access. Chromebooks that travel between home and school will be the new norm in our district as we realize that an internet connected Chromebook becomes an equalizing tool for learners. Elementary students have unlimited access to our online school library books as well as ready access to math practice and homework support. High school students are reporting greater success with larger writing projects because far too many students were attempting such projects on cell phones previously. Now that students have learned to use technology and understand the way that it can support their growth as learners, removing such devices would be malpractice. Our district simply cannot afford to take on the internet connectivity bills that we've supported throughout the pandemic with hotspots available to each family; however, we will continue to support wifi in our school buildings and parking lots and in selected neighborhood locations through point-to-point access. Internet access is not a luxury and our students deserve more than the limited access we can afford to support long-term, every American student can benefit from unlimited access to networking and the technology tools to access it. As we move beyond this crisis, I hope look back on this moment as our awakening- the moment we recognized the critical nature of technology and internet access for each and every student, not just for those fortunate enough to have parents who can afford it. We have learned to do better, and we must sustain these efforts to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to thrive as learners in the digital age."

Now is the time to stay the course and leverage all available funding and partnerships. For example, the Federal E-Rate (USAC Schools and Libraries) program offers discounts to Schools and Libraries on telecommunications services. There is also an FCC program that matches up to 10% provided by the State in additional to the E-Rate discount for schools who apply for E-Rate Program. The normally unattainable high-cost broadband projects become affordable builds for pennies on the dollar with little, and in some cases no, out of pocket expense to the district.

In the 2019 funding year, twelve Oregon applicants followed the rigorous application process. Tragically, the State Match Fund for Connecting Oregon Schools was not funded which subsequently denied students access to digital equity opportunities. Oregon Districts were unable to secure the State Match portion, forfeiting almost $20M in the USAC portion of funding, and Federal Match of almost $2M.

District	Discount Rate	Project Cost	E-Rate Request	Federal Match Request	State Match Request	Cost to schools
IMESD Tech Services						
Cove SD	70%	$ 556,869.00	$ 389,808.00	$ 55,687.00	$ 55,687.00	$ 55,687.00
Helix SD	60%	$ 777,400.00	$ 466,440.00	$ 77,740.00	$ 77,740.00	$155,480.00
Ukiah SD	90%	$ 7,394,000.00	$ 6,654,600.00	$ 369,700.00	$ 369,700.00	$0.00
Adrian SD	80%	$ 1,156,254.00	$ 925,003.00	$ 115,625.00	$ 115,625.00	$231,251.00
Annex SD	90%	$ 42,242.00	$ 38,018.00	$ 2,112.00	$ 2,112.00	$0.00
Four Rivers CS	90%	$ 55,287.00	$ 49,757.00	$ 2,765.00	$ 2,765.00	$0.00
Malheur ESD	72%	$ 15,054.00	$ 10,839.00	$ 1,505.00	$ 1,505.00	$ 1,205.00
Vale SD	90%	$ 851,893.00	$ 766,705.00	$ 42,594.00	$ 42,594.00	$0.00
Totals		$ 10,848,999.00	$ 9,301,170.00	$ 667,728.00	$ 667,728.00	$443,623.00

Harney ESD	80%	$ 11,517,777.00	$ 9,214,221.60	$ 1,151,777.70	$ 1,151,777.70	$0.00
North Central ESD	80%	$ 284,563.00	$ 227,650.40	$ 28,456.30	$ 28,456.30	$0.00
Luckiamute Valley Ch	80%	$ 1,135,000.00	$ 908,000.00	$ 113,500.00	$ 113,500.00	$0.00
Totals		$ 12,937,340.00	$ 10,349,872.00	$ 1,293,734.00	$ 1,293,734.00	

USAC Funds	$ 19,673,542.00
Federal Match Funds	$ 1,962,712.00
Total Funds Forfeited	$ 21,636,254.00

Ukiah School district is one of those districts, located in rural Umatilla County in Eastern Oregon that could have leveraged a $7.3 M build at $0 cost to the district. The remote school district uses a wireless company data plan that is inadequate. Students and teachers struggle with enough bandwidth for video streaming in more than one classroom at a time, state testing, or online curriculum. Broadband for this school and the community will be transformational.

The build challenges faced by remote rural Oregon include geography, distance, and lack of providers and/or available facilities. School district infrastructure projects, including broadband require long-term planning, technical assistance, and alignment with local budget cycles. Local technology leaders must follow a complex E-Rate application and procurement process, develop plans to sustain future needs, and work with their school boards and administrators to secure a place on the district's budget cycle. Without the financial support districts will not have access to the special construction opportunities to receive affordable fiber connectivity.

Oregon is making progress with the Connecting Oregon School Fund established under HB4023 in 2018 and establishing a revenue stream under HB 4079, in 2020. Oregon is off to a healthy start, however while we make inroads, the demand for capacity grows at warp speed. School districts must ensure that students and teachers, regardless of their community's location or economic status, have access to reliable high-capacity broadband that scales with the demand for successful teaching, learning, narrowing the homework gap, and school operations.

We must prioritize resources to support ubiquitous broadband advancement and the educational benefits that it leverages for decades to come. Broadband brings capacity, reliability, and sustainable access for the long term. Broadband is a solid investment of crucial importance to the future of Oregon schools and their communities.