

February 21, 2023

To: Economic and Small Business Committee

From: Suma Broadband Coalition Workgroup

Re: Testimony in Support of HB 3201-1 Aligning Statute to Maximize Federal Broadband Funding

Chair Bynum, Vice-Chairs Morgan and Nguyen, and Members of the Committee,

Access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet is an essential service that plays a vital role in economic and social development. An internet connection means access to education and job opportunities, healthcare, social safety nets, and support networks. Free Geek supports HB 3201, this bill was developed through a collaborative community-centered process, with participation from front-line community leaders, and public and private sector representatives. The bill ensures that Oregon is flexible, forward-thinking, and equitable in supporting broadband access, affordability, and adoption and ensures that the Oregon Broadband Fund can receive funding from a broader set of sources.

Free Geek has been a part of the ongoing conversation around digital equity. Free Geek has been serving the needs of frontline communities, serving as a liaison between constituents and complex government programs that offered support in the form of devices and internet cards when they were most needed during the beginning of the pandemic. Free Geek continued to serve beyond our capacity in the form of digital navigation, offering technical support to community members with little previous exposure to tech, and even less exposure to a world where being online was necessary to access the resources and information they needed.

The last few years have demonstrated that the digital divide reaches across the state. Because so much of Oregon is concentrated in urban and suburban centers, of the 129,709 estimated Oregon households without internet service, over 101,147 of them are in urban and suburban areas.¹ The state must recognize that we need to serve rural, frontier and historically underserved communities. Long term investments and solutions are needed to ensure that broadband is accessible and affordable for all Oregonians.

ARPA and IIJA funds are intended to target unserved, underserved, and tribal communities and improve digital equity in historically marginalized communities across the state. We appreciate every effort to demonstrate the State's commitment to closing the digital divide, particularly

¹ Digital Equity Issue Brief: Critical Internet Needs in the Portland Area. EcoNorthwest. June 1, 2022.

within our unserved and underserved communities. HB 3201 offers the flexibility needed to ensure Oregon can maximize the federal dollars coming to our state, which means more funding for our communities. Further it ensures an approach that is not a one size fits all to ensure strategic and equitable money allocation. Oregon's public investment must be different from the private and profitable methods that have left too many rural, frontier and historically underserved communities in our state behind.

Thank you for your continued leadership in working towards closing the digital divide and ensuring all Oregonians have access to quality, affordable, reliable and accessible broadband. We welcome an opportunity to further engage with the committee on these important issues.

Sincerely,

Free Geek