



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations
DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS REGULATION
1511 Pontiac Avenue, Bldg. 68-2
Cranston, Rhode Island 02920

Office of the Director

February 23, 2021

The Honorable Deborah Ruggiero
Chair, House Committee on Innovation, Internet and Technology
Rhode Island State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

RE: H5148 - AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT -- THE
RHODE ISLAND BROADBAND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The Department of Business Regulation writes in support of H5148, the designation of a broadband coordinator for Rhode Island as well as the establishment of a broadband oversight committee.

Rhode Island requires a digital strategy to match our digital needs. In order to emerge strong from the COVID-19 pandemic and lead in the digital millennium, we must be strategic in the technological infrastructure that we build, the digital systems we create, and the role the state plays in leading and coordinating these efforts.

This isn't a nice-to-have; this is a necessity for economic and societal development. And the foundation of this strategy is ubiquitous access to high-speed, affordable internet. The state needs a proactive broadband strategy—one that leverages the best-in-class infrastructure that our state has and that ensures digital equity and affordable internet for all.

In order to achieve this, we need a broadband coordinator to lead this work. Whether we engage or not, the digital revolution will happen. Rhode Island needs to ensure that our state is strategically leading the charge, rather than allowing other states to overtake us—or third parties to dictate for us what broadband access and digital engagement looks like in our state. Specifically, a broadband coordinator and oversight committee are uniquely positioned to:

- ***Apply for, secure, and manage federal funding:*** The most recent stimulus package includes \$7bn for broadband, which will be competitively allocated. Annually, there are hundreds of millions of federal dollars to support state broadband projects that are allocated. News reports indicate that more, not less, funding will be available to states for broadband in the new administration. Yet, since the closure of Broadband Rhode Island, we have secured none of this federal broadband funding. We need a broadband coordinator to ensure Rhode Island isn't left out of federal funding.
- ***Liaise with partners and ensure strategic implementation of broadband efforts:*** We hear from municipal and community leaders often: There is a deep need in state for more accessible internet and local leaders are heeding the charge. In New Shoreham, the town set up a municipal broadband network. Providence Public Schools and Central Falls School Districts

have piloted new open access broadband networks for their students. One Neighborhood Builders has set up a community WiFi network for residents in Olneyville. The collective is greater than the sum of the parts, yet these important efforts currently exist in silos. We need increased coordination and collaboration to ensure local broadband efforts maximize efficiency, learn from each other, and can benefit from economies of scale.

- ***Deliberate on and answer questions that arise:*** The internet, broadband, and cyber security will be increasingly complex moving forward. Yet there is currently no state entity designated to answer or wrestle with critical questions around digital equity and access, infrastructure ownership and funding, and broadband regulation and oversight. We need state-level leadership to ensure we are driving these strategic conversations and making decisions in the best interests of RI residents and businesses, not interest groups.
- ***Set and achieve bold goals for the state:*** In 2010, Rhode Island made a leap ahead of other states by creating the Beacon 2.0 network. But since then, we have fallen behind. Presently, Rhode Island is only one of two states in the country without a broadband coordinator or office. We are being left behind in this critical infrastructure race nationally—and internationally. We need a coordinator and oversight committee to hold us as a state responsible to bold and necessary goals around broadband.
- ***Ensure equitable access to information and opportunities:*** Through no fault of anyone, misinformation—or lack of information—on resources, incentives, and available programs abound. We need a dedicated coordinator to ensure all Rhode Island businesses, municipalities, and residents are able to access affordable broadband, incentives, grant opportunities, and digital literacy trainings.

As the Brookings Institution wrote in 2020, “if broadband is essential infrastructure, then regulation and public policy should support every American community having equitable access to broadband and the skills necessary to use it.”

To further improve our service of all Rhode Islanders and the robust economic development our state deserves, DBR recommends H5148 for passage and stands at the ready to support the coordinator, the committee, and RI Commerce in executing a proactive and productive digital strategy for Rhode Island.

Thank you for your consideration of our position on this proposed legislation.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth M. Tanner
Director, Department of Business Regulation

cc: Representative Art Handy, First Vice Chair
Representative Lauren Carson, Second Vice Chair