

June 18, 2015

We would like to first thank our fellow committee members for serving on the **Special Legislative Commission to Broadband Service and Accessibility** (“the Commission”), of which we are the co-chairs. Additionally, we wish to thank the more than 19 individuals who testified representing government entities, broadband providers, adult education providers and other broadband related businesses.

Broadband cuts across all aspects of our lives. It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century highway of our information economy. Business, education, libraries, individuals, healthcare and government have enhanced services while reducing costs by leveraging the capabilities of broadband thus advancing and growing the Rhode Island economy. Broadband is a necessity like water and electricity, universally needed to effectively operate and compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In Rhode Island, the news on our broadband infrastructure is extremely good, as we rank near the top of every poll with regards to the speeds and quality of our Internet infrastructure. However we do have certain areas that require improvement such as broadband adoption where many RI households, almost one third, still do not utilize to the Internet. Many of these households lack the digital literacy skills needed to perform the most basic online functions such as e-mail, posting resumes, searching for jobs or even to using a computer. This “Digital Divide” negatively impacts many of our most vulnerable citizens especially those with low incomes and people of color.

Because the Internet has become essential to full participation in public life, the federal government and specifically the Obama administration, have made this a central policy issue and is committed to achieving universal broadband access for our nation, similar to the high levels of access achieved for electricity and telephone service in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To this end, the federal government, through stimulus funding and other programs invested over \$7B in broadband infrastructure, planning and data collection projects in all 50 states and 6 territories, including Rhode Island.

These programs addressed building broadband infrastructure (specifically fiber) in places where it doesn’t already exist, providing better Internet to our community anchor institutions, and promoting Internet use, literacy and adoption for our citizens.

New programs are being developed by the federal government, such as modernizing e-Rate – the program that funds broadband for schools and libraries across the country and the introduction of Firstnet – a new nationwide wireless broadband network for the public safety community.

Further, in many places, such as Kansas City, Austin and Chattanooga, as well as states in our own backyard, there is intense discussion and negotiations going on about the next generation of broadband technology with speeds 10 to 100 times faster than we have today. These new projects are creating jobs and restructuring and improving the economic development environments in these communities and can quickly impact our current leadership in broadband infrastructure.

The Commission had an opportunity to develop critical understanding of broadband's impact and opportunities as we examined the issues. As a result of our hearings, and staff research, we all became better informed on the immense opportunities as well as numerous broadband adoption and utilization challenges faced by almost one third of our citizens.

The Commission worked to:

- 1) Identify the current level of broadband service state-wide**
- 2) Analyze the policies and actions necessary to eliminate obstacles to the investment in and the identification of areas in the state that currently lack the infrastructure necessary to support broadband service**
- 3) Identify and address the digital gap in both the minority and rural communities,**
- 4) Explore opportunities for potential public/private sector partnerships,**
- 5) Evaluate the various strategies, financing methods, and financial incentives used in other states and countries to support deployment of high-speed broadband,**
- 6) Review the security, vulnerability, and redundancy actions necessary to ensure the reliability of high-speed broadband**
- 7) Explore the economic development opportunities made possible by the wide dissemination of high-speed broadband,**
- 8) Examine how access to high-speed broadband can benefit educational institutions, community based organizations, and government institutions, and**
- 9) Assess the current public centers for broadband access as well as potential future plans to enhance access to underserved communities throughout the state.**

The Broadband Commission thoroughly examined these topics and makes the following related findings and recommendations contained herein to the General Assembly:

As we end this legislative session, it is our belief that the Broadband Commission's recommendations will not only maintain our competitive advantage but also increase its adoption and utilization by all citizens thus increasing economic development opportunities while eliminating certain barriers to success. In future legislative sessions, we believe that the excellent work of the Broadband Commission can be leveraged for the benefit of all of the state's residents and businesses.

Thank-you

Senator Juan M. Pichardo  
Co-Chair

Representative Deborah L. Ruggiero  
Co-Chair

