

House and Senate Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committees

AG Progress Days

Testimony on Broadband Access

Pennsylvania State Grange

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Wayne Campbell
President
Pennsylvania State Grange
717-275-5045
president@pagrange.org

Chairs Vogel, Schwank, Causer, and Pashinski, and members of the House and Senate Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committees:

Thank you very much for having the Pennsylvania State Grange testify. If the House or Senate Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committees convene another hearing on this topic, we respectfully ask to be able to present our views in detail.

Pennsylvania State Grange has represented rural Pennsylvanians, both farmers and others, since 1873. Currently, we are pushing for universal access to Broadband for rural Pennsylvania as our number one priority. To understand this issue fully, we need to go back to the early days of the last century to the days before rural electrification described in the 2018 book, Century of Innovation.

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Successful at building plants to service large concentrated markets, IOUs in the first third of the century made relatively limited forays into rural America, where scattered farm families were isolated by distance from urban generating plants. As the inhabitants of New York, Chicago, and other cities across the country enjoyed the gleaming lights and the new labor-saving devices powered by electricity, life in rural America remained difficult. On 90 percent of American farms the only artificial light came from smoky, fummy lamps. Water had to be pumped by hand and heated over wood-burning stoves. Virtually every chore required manual labor; for many farm wives the most tiresome of all was the seemingly endless backbreaking drudgery of washing and ironing the family's clothes and linens.

(<http://www.greatachievements.org/?id=2988>)

What transformed rural America to give it electrical equity with urban areas was a concerted effort by government, the private sector and especially the formation of rural electrical cooperatives. Rural electrification allowed rural America to fully be a part of the American economic miracle and helped to end the isolation and sense of exclusion that some felt.

Broadband access is to this century what rural electrification was to the 20th Century.

Fast Forward to the Present

- A Broadband Caucus has been formed in the House by Representatives Pam Snyder (D-Fayette/Greene/Washington) and Kristin Phillips-Hill. As of August 1st, these members of the House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee had signed on to be members of the Broadband Caucus. **We want to recognize them publically:**
 - **Majority Chair Martin Causer**
 - **Minority Chair Eddie Day Pashinski**
 - **Pam Snyder**
 - **Dave Millard**
 - **Gary Day**
 - **Karen Boback**

- **Kate Klunk**
- **Rich Irvin**

Of course, that leaves members of this committee who are not part of the Broadband Caucus. We urge you to join just as we urge members of the Senate Agriculture & Rural Affairs to establish a similar caucus on the Senate side. This will help to keep the General Assembly focused on this issue.

Although legislators from rural areas are familiar with the need, please consider these examples:

- Representative Kristin Phillips-Hill (R-York) told a Grange panel on Broadband at the Farm Show that what got her involved in the issue was the sight of **parents bringing their kids to school parking lots to do their homework in the evenings** because they did not have Internet at home.
- PA Campground Owners Association report that some of their members could not **verify credit card transactions** or even take reservations online.
- A farmer buys a new piece of **farm equipment**. Thanks to technology, it provides more efficiency in agriculture. However, without Broadband access, this technology is just an expensive feature with no usefulness in the field.
- Will a business choose **a place to invest with full access to technology** where it can do all the things a business must do...market, take and process and fulfill orders, negotiate with suppliers...or will it choose a rural area where insufficient or no access exists?
- Telemedicine is modern medicine's answer to problems associated with providing care to isolated or house-bound individuals. Travel to a limited number of health care providers and hospitals is simply not in the cards for many older Pennsylvanians, especially during winter months. Rep. Marguarite Quinn (R-Bucks) and Senator Elder Vogel (R-Beaver) introduced legislation (HB 1648 and SB 780) regarding telemedicine which the PA State Grange supports. **However, telemedicine does not work if there is no connectivity.** Remote monitoring of a health condition? No. The doctor reviewing condition with a patient communicating real-time data? No.

As one example, when Governor Wolf announced his intent to spend \$30-plus million to Broadband access along highways, he commented on the cell phone desert along portions of Route 6 along Pennsylvania's Northern Tier.

Legislators have probably heard these or other examples like these. The question is what actions should be taken by the General Assembly. Pennsylvania State Grange asks that these be supported.

First, Pennsylvania State Grange wants to see **continued access to land-line telephones in rural areas**. Phone companies have converted to digital which makes land-line telephones seem outdated. But, an area without access to modern technology must rely on land-line because that is all there is. We support legislation to continue the Universal Service Fund so long as universal Broadband access is not yet universal. We support **Senate Bill 740** sponsored by Sen. Ryan Aument (R-Lancaster) and any House measures that have or will be introduced to do the same. (*The General Assembly website only showed the one bill.*)

Besides this stopgap, we urge the General Assembly to complete action on the four-bill package of Broadband bills introduced by Rep. Kristin Phillips-Hill (R-York) and her Democratic colleague Rep. Pam Snyder (D-Fayette/Greene/Washington). This bipartisan legislation should be a top priority in 2018. The bills are:

- **House Resolution 429 to establish a Bipartisan Bicameral Legislative Commission** to make sure focus is continued on this issue.
- **House Resolution 430 to investigate where or not there has been compliance with previous Broadband legislation**, Act 67 of 1993 and Act 183 of 2004.
- **House Resolution 431 to audit the special Education Technology E-Fund** to examine its administration by the Department of Education.
- **House Bill 1642 to conduct an inventory of state property** to see where it could be used to allow for more access.

In addition, the House could **adopt a resolution similar to House Resolution 630** also sponsored by Representatives Snyder and Phillips-Hill. This adds the voice of the House of Representatives to those others supporting the Public Utility Commission and Department of Community & Economic Development (DCED) efforts to convince the Federal Communications Commission to allocate funding for PA Broadband expansion. This is especially timely given the U.S. Congress' inclusion of Broadband access infrastructure monies in the March 2018 Omnibus Funding bill signed into law by President Trump.

Of course, there is other legislation advanced by Chairman Causer and Rep Frank Farry (Bucks) that also seek to address this issue. Hopefully, the House Rural Broadband Caucus will help forge these separate pieces of legislation into a comprehensive package to help meet this goal.

Needless to say, the General Assembly should continue to **support efforts by the Wolf Administration such as the Governor's Rural Development Council and creation of a special unit within the Governor's Office** to coordinate state governmental efforts to reach this shared goal.

The sad thing is that all the entities with an interest in Broadband access are still not communicating as much as they should.

Conclusion

We have seen some progress but face it, Pennsylvania is behind. My Legislative Director went to an event in Centreville, Maryland in July. He spoke with their Rural Development people and learned that Maryland already has a grant mechanism in place specific to Broadband expansion as well as completing their inventory of state structures that could be used for Broadband expansion purposes. New York and Ohio are also ahead of Pennsylvania. This should be the number one priority for our Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committees in Pennsylvania today.