Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 1, 2019

Honorable Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

In North Dakota, we know how important a quality broadband connection is to urban and rural citizens alike. While many North Dakotans benefit from high-speed internet, some residents still lack a quality connection to this increasingly necessary tool. That is why we write to encourage the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to take steps to improve broadband maps.

As you know, broadband enables economic development, increases the ability to access health care services, and expands educational horizons to position our students to compete in a 21st Century economy. In fact, North Dakota has a project underway that will make it the first state in the nation to bring a gigabit internet connection to every school. Having access to quality broadband will play a critical role in allowing the United States to remain a global leader.

The importance of access to broadband is why we write to share our concerns with the current broadband maps. We request that the FCC more precisely identify where fixed and mobile broadband service is available or lacking in North Dakota and across the United States. Congress has made it a priority to invest in programs to expand quality broadband service to unserved and underserved areas of our nation. Accurate broadband maps are important to ensure federal funding is used efficiently and effectively, and targets areas that stand to benefit the most.

As you know, data for broadband maps is based upon information received from internet service providers. FCC Form 477 asks providers to report where internet service is advertised by census blocks. Our constituents have highlighted that there are several problems with the current maps. First, maps are not granular enough. More granular maps would more accurately identify where service exists and where it does not. Currently, in regards to the fixed broadband map, an entire census block will appear as served if just one location in that census block has service. This can result in denial of broadband funding in such areas, leaving many locations without essential broadband service simply because they share a census block with a served household. Another significant concern is that there is not a streamlined process to verify the accuracy of data reported. This means funding decisions flow directly from a map that has not been verified at the federal level. As the Mobility Fund experience indicated, reliance only upon self-reported data does not always yield helpful information or good results.
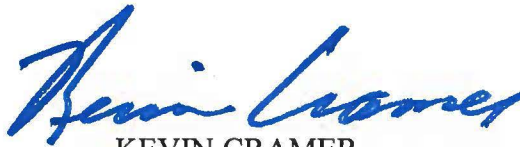
It is important for the FCC to develop more standardized, granular reporting of broadband availability – while also balancing the burdens of reporting especially for smaller operators. Additionally, it is important to ensure the accuracy of that more granular data. Therefore, we encourage the FCC to establish robust and meaningful challenge processes that will enable better validation of both fixed and mobile data prior to relying upon such data in making funding or financing decisions.

It is critical to ensure inaccurate information will not result in a denial of access to fixed or mobile broadband, or result in the overbuilding of an existing, quality network. A validated set of data based upon standardized methods of granular reporting is essential to ensuring that universal service is available throughout rural America. Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to continue working with you to ensure that Americans have access to robust and reliable broadband service.

Sincerely,

JOHN HOEVEN
U.S. Senator

KEVIN CRAMER
U.S. Senator

KELLY ARMSTRONG
U.S. Congressman

May 23, 2019

The Honorable Kevin Cramer
United States Senate
B240C Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510
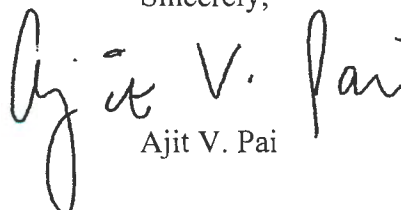
Dear Senator Cramer:

Thank you for your letter regarding broadband mapping. Closing the digital divide is my top priority. I have seen for myself, during visits to 45 states and the territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, what affordable high-speed Internet access can do for a community—for its families, its schools, its hospitals, its farms, its businesses—as well as the impact of its absence.

I agree that using updated and accurate broadband deployment data is critical to bridging the digital divide. As you note in your letter, we need to understand where broadband is available and where it is not to target our efforts and direct funding to areas that are most in need. That is why the Commission initiated two basic reforms to the collection of broadband data when I came into office. First, we initiated a new data collection for mobile broadband coverage as part of Phase II of the Mobility fund (which included a robust challenge process). Second, we began a top-to-bottom review of the Form 477 process to ensure that broadband data was more accurate, granular, and ultimately useful to the Commission and the public.

In your letter, you encourage the FCC to establish robust and meaningful challenge processes, and I believe that implementing this type of public feedback mechanism could improve the Commission's broadband coverage maps and its Form 477 data. Indeed, as you may know, the Commission's Speed Test App is one way consumers can currently participate in collecting data about broadband deployment, and it has proven to be a useful tool for assessing service availability. I've asked Commission staff to look into other ways to collect and use accurate data from many sources—including consumers themselves—to assemble a more reliable map. We are interested in developing methods for the submission of reliable, consumer-driven data to better inform the Commission's decision making in this area. We would be happy to receive any input you or your staff might have on how to establish and implement such methods.

I appreciate your interest in working with the FCC to close the digital divide and look forward to continuing to collaborate on this issue. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,

Ajit V. Pai

May 23, 2019

The Honorable John Hoeven
United States Senate
338 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510
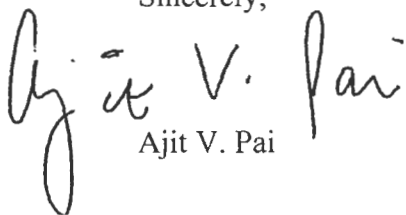
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Ajit V. Pai

May 23, 2019

The Honorable Kelly Armstrong
U.S. House of Representatives
1004 Longworth House Office Building
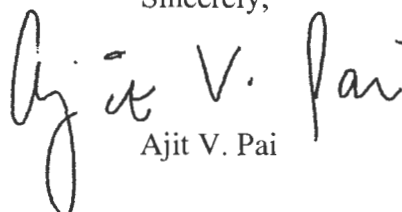Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Armstrong:

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