CYNTHIA AXNE
3RD DISTRICT, IOWA

COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES
INVESTOR PROTECTION, ENTREPRENEURSHIP,
AND CAPITAL MARKETS
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CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

July 30, 2019

WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE
330 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-5476

DES MOINES OFFICE
400 EAST COURT AVE., SUITE 346
DES MOINES, IA 50309
(515) 400-8180

COUNCIL BLUFFS OFFICE
501 5TH AVE.
COUNCIL BLUFFS, IA 51503
(712) 890-3117

CRESTON OFFICE
208 WEST TAYLOR
CRESTON, IA 50801
(515) 400-8180

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

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Dear Chairman Pai:

I am writing to you today to express the importance of ensuring that broadband service is expanded to reach all of our rural communities. Rural broadband is essential to modern agriculture, small businesses, and thriving rural towns. As a member of the House Majority Whip's Rural Broadband Task Force, getting rural communities connected to the internet so they can grow and thrive is one of my highest priorities.

The first step in getting every American access to high-speed internet is to properly understand who still needs it, which is why we must improve the Federal Communications Commission's maps. The current system where if one location in a census block has service, the full block appears to be served is simply not accurate enough and will always understate the scale of the problem. As an example, although the FCC's most recent Broadband Deployment Report showed 21.3 million Americans without broadband service, the true number is certainly higher than that, with most of the undercount being in rural areas.

When those inaccurate maps are then used to determine funding for new projects, areas which still need assistance can get left behind. I was reassured to see that your proposal earlier this month would have required the providers to provide more granular information about where they've built out the infrastructure needed to provide broadband service and would urge you to expedite the process of getting accurate information as much as possible.

However, there is one area that this information will not improve. Having the shapefiles that your proposal requests will still not improve our understanding of how many Americans are not currently using broadband. Getting that information will require more detail than the current reporting of the number of end users in a census tract, which suffers from uncertainty with regard to the type of customer (business vs residential), as well as a lack of information about what speed they might be getting. While I recognize there are some concerns regarding the burden this might place on smaller companies, getting a clear understanding of the barriers to getting every American broadband is essential to finishing the work of getting everyone connected, so I urge you and the Commission to take the necessary steps to get that data in the most efficient way possible.

Once we have accurate information, there will still be more work to do. In Iowa, we have wide variations in speed and access even between communities that are very close together. Red Oak, in my district, is ranked 54th among Iowa cities for internet connection, but less than 25 miles away in a town that's similar in size, Shenandoah ranked 430th. Much of this disparity is due solely to "last mile" issues, where the infrastructure has been built out to the region, but not all the way to the home. In fact, in some of these areas broadband service stops exactly at the county or city line.

I would ask that as the FCC transitions what was the Connect America Fund into the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), it looks to maximize scarce resources by examining all possible ways to leverage existing middle mile infrastructure to get Iowans and Americans fully connected with broadband service. Since most estimates of the total cost of deploying broadband to every American are at least double the $20 billion proposed, we should not pretend that this will be sufficient to get everyone service.

Instead, we should seek to maximize the RDOF's effectiveness in terms of getting people access. I have areas like Montgomery County in my district that only need $2 million more in order to be the first county in Iowa to have full fiber to the home, and getting communities like that to have full connectivity will be immensely valuable in understanding what strategies can be successful elsewhere.

Finally, please make sure that the FCC is doing everything it can to provide not only financing but also guidance and advice to communities which are looking for the type of economic development that high-speed internet can bring. Small companies and communities can have difficulty navigating the various funding sources that the federal government offers, and simply having someone who understands them and can help navigate those would go a long way to making sure the funding is effectively spent to help our rural communities.

Thank you for your attention to these requests. I look forward to working with you and the FCC to ensure we don't leave our rural communities behind, and instead make sure they have the resources they need to make sure every American has fast, reliable broadband service.

Sincerely,
Cindy Axne
Member of Congress

August 22, 2019

The Honorable Cindy Axne
U.S. House of Representatives
330 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Axne:

Thank you for your letter regarding broadband in rural America. Closing the digital divide is my top priority. I have seen for myself in 45 states, including Iowa, and the territories of Puerto Rico and the 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. 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 needed. That is why the Commission 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.
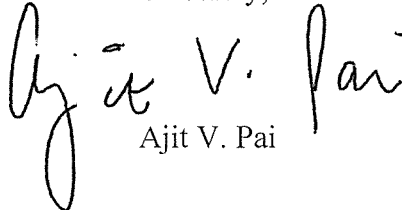
Along those lines, the Commission adopted a Report and Order on August 1 to create the Digital Opportunity Data Collection, an all-new approach to mapping that would yield more granular and more accurate broadband maps. That Report and Order also provides for regular updates of the filed data to ensure that the maps we rely on are current. That means requiring broadband providers to report where they actually offer service below the census block level, having the Universal Service Administrative Company independently test the validity of that data, and incorporating public feedback to ensure up to date and accurate broadband deployment maps.

These updated maps will be used to focus funding to expand broadband through future initiatives such as the second phase of the proposed Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund will complement and build on the success of the CAF Phase II auction of fixed broadband support, which allocated $1.488 billion to expand broadband to more than 700,000 unserved rural homes and small businesses over the next 10 years. Once implemented, the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund would provide over $20 billion over the next decade to connect millions of rural homes and businesses to high-speed broadband, representing the FCC's single biggest step yet to close the digital divide.

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