

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 26, 2009

The Honorable Michael Copps
Acting-Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20554

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RE: GN Docket No. 09-51

Dear Chairman Copps:

With the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), Congress has required the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to begin developing a national broadband plan to be submitted by February 17, 2010. This plan will propose how to ensure that every American has access to broadband. As Members of the bipartisan Congressional Rural Caucus, we submit the following comments to be included as the FCC begins this national dialogue.

Currently a number of federal programs already invest in broadband deployment. A challenge that faces the Departments tasked with direct implementation is the need for intense coordination. In addition, a number of Departments tasked with funding infrastructure projects may present missed synergistic opportunities for broadband deployment. In its proposal to Congress, the FCC should include recommendations on how to maximize federal investments into broadband by enhancing coordination and information sharing between the agencies.

As part of the ARRA, Congress provided \$4.7 billion for the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and another \$2.5 billion to the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to expand broadband throughout the country. A majority of these funds will focus on the construction of self sustaining broadband projects. While the impact of the ARRA broadband funding remains to be seen, its intent is well founded in addressing the barriers to broadband access in rural areas. Any aggressive strategy to connect every American should continue the federal government's initial investment, which began with ARRA, beyond fiscal year 2010.

Future investments into expanding broadband access by the federal government should primarily be focused on areas without service and be made in a technologically neutral manner. In addition, an emphasis should be placed on projects that seek to connect the most individuals in the most cost effective manner with these scarce federal resources. However, even with additional federal support, the disproportionate costs associated with

rural areas require a special focus. In specific, a national broadband plan should recognize that a combined federal and private investment in “middle mile” construction can significantly bring down the costs for rural Internet Service Providers to provide broadband access.

It is an understatement to say that communities that lack broadband access in today’s world are at a disadvantage. Businesses without broadband cannot compete in a globalized market, schools without broadband cannot properly prepare their students for the workforce of tomorrow, and hospitals without broadband cannot access the latest advancements in tele-health. The lack of broadband access for these private and public sectors have far reaching consequences to our rural communities for it reduces their opportunities for employment, reduces their quality of life, and stifles their potential for economic development.

A national strategy should place a priority emphasis on providing incentives and funding opportunities that target these specific sectors. These private and public institutions are capable of serving as anchor tenants for expanding broadband networks in rural communities. Connecting these institutions and sectors will directly benefit the lives of rural residents’ while simultaneously reduce the costs to further provide residential broadband access. Furthermore, serving these anchor tenants as a means to establishing broadband networks in rural areas can yield additional benefits by providing first responders the ability to maintain interoperable communications in all parts of the country. Ultimately, for a national interoperable communications network to exist, broadband infrastructure must be accessible to reconcile the local, state, and federal communications systems.

Basic broadband service is no longer a luxury, but is a necessity and a national broadband plan should reflect this transformation as fundamentally important as electricity and water. While billions of private dollars have been invested in broadband across the country, and billions in additional public dollars will be invested in the coming years, some communities in the most rural areas may continue to lack broadband access in the future. Due to these instances, it is imperative that a national broadband policy addresses these unique cases and attempts to develop sustainable solutions around these very remote communities.

Lastly, a national broadband policy must recognize the need for reform of the Universal Service Fund (USF) that has been instrumental in bringing phone service to nearly every American. USF reform must be technology neutral and recognize that broadband should be a supported service and special efforts should be made to provide predictable, targeted support to achieve the final goal of universal service.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment on behalf of the bipartisan Congressional Rural Caucus. As your agency continues to develop the national broadband plan for our nation, our caucus stands ready to work with you to further our mutual goals of expanding broadband access to all corners of our nation.

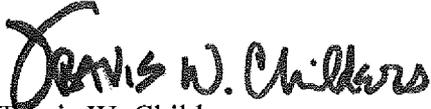
Sincerely,



Rep. Bart Stupak
Rural Telecommunications Task Force
Co-Chair



Rep. Lee Terry
Rural Telecommunications Task Force
Co-Chair



Travis W. Childers
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