

Center for Rural Pennsylvania
Wellsboro, PA
Testimony on Broadband Access
Pennsylvania State Grange
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The Pennsylvania State Grange appreciates the attention given to the Broadband access issue by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Just as with the opioid hearings, the Center has helped the General Assembly to better understand the issue so as to develop solutions. We believe the same thing will happen with today's hearing. It should help crystallize a sense of the issue and lay the groundwork for steps that can be taken.

I attended Governor Wolf's recent press conference where he announced the formation of the special unit within the Office of the Governor. It was encouraging to see his commitment of \$35 million from PennDOT to upgrade Broadband access along PA roadways. The Pennsylvania State Grange would respectfully request that Route 6 be the first. Route 6 is an economic lifeline for the Northern Tier. It should be the Broadband lifeline as well.

Although encouraging, it is but a first step. Hopefully, the Commonwealth will engage with the Trump Administration to secure some of the money promised for Broadband infrastructure in the Omnibus Budget Resolution signed by the President in March. Likewise, Pennsylvania should mount an all-out effort to convince the FCC to help supply us with needed resources as well.

I hope that the Center for Rural Pennsylvania will continue to stress the importance of securing these resources to the General Assembly and to Administration policymakers.

As you may know, Pennsylvania State Grange has represented rural Pennsylvanians, both farmers and others, since 1873. We have traditionally argued for more Broadband access for rural PA. In fact, it is 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, fume 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.

Fast Forward to the Present

Broadband access is to rural Pennsylvania today what rural electrification was in the last century. Look at 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.
- Also at the same event, PA Campground Owners Association reported 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 can do everything – measure soil moisture for example – providing efficiency in agriculture. However, without Broadband access, this technology is just an expensive feature with no usefulness in the field.
- Consider a business deciding where to invest. Will it choose a place 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.

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 take up 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 directing the Department of General Services 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/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.

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.

A current example is the Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (DCNR) announcement that it was planning to upgrade fire towers. A legitimate oversight by the General Assembly would be asking DCNR to identify where technology access could be piggybacked on these existing structures. Please note the following article from the February 21, 2018 DCNR Resource Newsletter.

Fire Towers in Woodlands Across the State to Be Replaced and Renovated

Newly renovated and replaced fire towers will be added to the commonwealth's wildfire fighting arsenal to support the Bureau of Forestry and volunteer fire company efforts answering forest fire calls across the state.

In September 2017, DCNR began a \$4.6 million Department of General Services capital project to replace 16 forest fire lookout towers on state forestland. Many of the original towers still in operation today were constructed in the 1920s through 1940 and needed to be replaced.

The new fire towers are sturdier to meet today's structural and foundation code requirements. They will be safer to ascend, with improved stairs and railings, and be topped with weather-proof cabs. [Read more...](#)

The article presents an opportunity not only to provide access to Broadband but also an opportunity to work in partnership with state agencies to reach this goal.

Conclusion

This issue, just as with rural electrification in the 20th Century, is complex and difficult. It is certainly more complicated than flipping a switch (pun intentional). It requires a multi-year commitment by all interested parties to develop the solutions that will truly achieve what rural electrification achieved – rural Broadband equity for the 21st Century.