Testimony of Mary Beth Henry, Digital Equity/Broadband Advocate

Before the House Revenue Committee on Revenue – April 2, 2019

RE: HB 2184

Chair Nathanson, Vice Chairs Findley and Marsh and Committee Members. Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective on HB 2184. I am currently a Digital Equity/Broadband Advocate and formerly served for 9 years on the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council representing communities across Oregon. I also served as President of NATOA, a national organization that supports and serves the communications interests and needs of local governments. Broadband infrastructure is today's platform upon which we have come to depend in our daily lives. Digital skills underpin nearly every aspect of work and life - from filling out a job application to doing homework to checking on healthcare to paying a bill to communicating at work, it's difficult to find a life-task that does not require some level of broadband connectivity and digital literacy. Yet approximately 1 in 5 Oregonians doesn't have internet access at home.

Digital Equity - I think it is helpful in policy discussions to ensure that we have a common understanding of key terms. Thus, I'd like to take a moment to define two key terms: Digital Equity and the Digital Divide. These definitions come from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, an organization that provides a unified voice for home broadband access, public broadband access, personal devices and local technology training and support programs. I should disclose that I served as a Senior Fellow with NDIA a couple of years ago.

Digital Equity ensures all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services. The first step to digital equity is broadband availability.

The next term I'd like to define is the Digital Divide which refers to the difference/gap between people who have easy access to the Internet, have devices, have digital skills and those who don't.

The digital divide is really "digital divides": Differences between rural and urban Internet access; Socioeconomic differences, people of different races, income levels, education, special needs or disabilities, etc. that affects their ability to access the internet

Why does digital equity matter? Because broadband infrastructure supports and enables everything – it is foundational. Yet 1 in 5 Oregonians don't have internet at home.

Broadband Availability in Oregon - This map shows only those households that could get broadband, it doesn't mean they actually subscribe. Lighter areas mean they have broadband access while the darker areas mean they don't. As we all know the point of connectivity is what you do with it. But first you have to have it. In Harney, Sherman, Wheeler, Morrow and Baker Counties 50% of the population do

not have access to Broadband. In only 8 Oregon counties is broadband available to 95% of the population.

Broadband Infrastructure is essential yet according to PEW Research, Rural Americans are more than twice as likely as those who live in urban or suburban settings to never use the internet. Furthermore, about six-in-ten rural Americans (58%) believe access to high speed internet is a problem in their area.

Broadband is a Rural-Urban shared imperative - What do I mean by this? Imperative means urgent, essential, important. We have Oregonians who couldn't get broadband access if they wanted to because it doesn't exist where they live or if it is available many can't afford it or don't understand why they should be online. It really is an economic imperative for Oregon.

We need to work together rural and urban to ensure that all Oregonians have access and the skills needed to be more employable, productive, creative, healthy and successful while ensuring they remain safe and secure online. Do we want to see the dumbing down of the next generation of Oregonians for lack of connectivity? Data suggests that if a rural area has widely available and adopted broadband, it can start to successfully attract and retain millennials.

32 million new jobs were created in the digital economy between 2010 and 2016. Let's make sure that all of Oregon communities can participate in this wave of growth.

Oregon's Homegrown Success Stories: Broadband Access - Many electric cooperatives may already have fiber in place for their electricity business. Several started by building fiber optic lines to substations and large demand centers to increase the reliability of the electric system through better monitoring. This forms the backbone of the network for Internet access to businesses and residents. Douglas Fast Net and Eastern Oregon Telecom are examples of coop's that have successfully deployed broadband in rural areas.

Maupin, Oregon now ranks among the state's most competitive communities when it comes to internet access. The network can provide speeds of 1 gigabit per second (gbps) per customer —vastly improving the city's economic and educational opportunities. The network is a Public Private Partnership between LS Networks/City of Maupin/Q-Life/GorgeNet.

Final Thoughts - The internet is the new essential utility, yet many Oregonians don't have broadband access.

The digital divide is a critical economic challenge for both rural and urban areas. Imagine a future where young people can choose to live in rural areas because there are livable wage jobs.

Oregon's home-grown success stories can inform broadband access strategies going forward.

I urge this Committee and the Legislature to modernize the OUSF to support broadband grants for un- and-underserved areas so that all of Oregon has the opportunity to prosper in the digital age.

Thank you.