

TESTIMONY OF MR. JOSEPH FRANELL
OREGON BROADBAND ADVISORY COUNCIL
Before the Joint Committee on Information Management and Technology

Wednesday, February 17, 2021

Co-Chairs Riley and Nathanson, and Members of the Committee:

Good morning. For the record, my name is Joseph Franell, Chair of the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council (generally referred to as OBAC). I am also the President of Blue Mountain Networks, which includes Eastern Oregon Telecom, Gorge Networks, and Axxis Communications. We are a rural competitive Internet service provider and telephone company serving more than 30 communities throughout Northeastern Oregon, Southeastern Washington, and the Mid-Columbia Region. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to present highlights of OBAC's "Broadband in Oregon Report".

I have provided written testimony for your reference.

It is our State's policy to promote broadband adoption and utilization and to reduce the digital divide. To help with this, the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council was created in the 2009 Legislative session to help ensure the implementation of statewide broadband strategies. The mission of the council is to:

- Encourage coordination and collaboration between organizations and economic sectors
- Leverage the development and utilization of broadband for education, workforce development, government and healthcare, and
- Promote broadband adoption by citizens and communities.

The council members represent Oregon's

- Cities
- Counties
- Telecommunications service providers and Internet service providers
- Tribes
- Education
- Economic development
- Public safety
- Health
- Oregon Department of Transportation
- The Office of the State CIO
- The Public Utility Commission
- The State House of Representatives and the State Senate.
- Consumers and the public at large

Members of the Council are appointed by the Governor, the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a hyper-accelerator for broadband public policy, applications, adoption, utilization, and infrastructure deployment. It has created a new sense of understanding, urgency, and commitment to address the long-standing challenges of the Digital Divide. There is no longer a debate about the importance of broadband access. The question we face is how to provide for access and full utilization of the Internet for all Oregonians, a mission that many broadband advocates, local communities and service providers have been working to accomplish for many years.

Broadband Report

On November 1, 2020, the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council (OBAC) submitted its sixth report to the Legislative Assembly on the affordability and accessibility of broadband technology in all areas of the state, and on broadband technology use in business, healthcare, energy management, education, and government. The 2020 report also presents information on the role of broadband in local, regional, and state economies, economic development, public policy issues, and key broadband related challenges and opportunities facing the state.

The report has been provided to the committee and can be found at www.broadband-oregon.org.

In that report, we affirm that Oregon's broadband public policy needs to be focused on the future, be more aggressive, be more financially supportive, be more specific, and have a renewed sense of urgency.

Key Broadband Challenges and Opportunities: OBAC has identified the following key broadband challenges and opportunities facing Oregon.

- **Digital Inclusion:** Oregon needs funded state-level strategies and programs to ensure that all individuals and communities have access to affordable state of the art broadband communications services, and the skills, knowledge and technical support needed to use them.
- **Cyber Security:** The security of data and communications systems continues to be a critical risk exposure for government, public organizations, private sector businesses, and for individuals that is widely unrecognized and under managed. Oregon needs to follow-through on its 2017 cyber security legislative initiatives www.cyberoregon.com. Expanded and pro-active cyber risk management is needed.
- **Education:** Oregon's K-20 educational institutions are positioned to realize significant economic, work force and community development benefits for the state through the utilization of broadband networks and applications. State level support and technical assistance is needed.
- **Public Safety:** Oregon's first responders are at a transition point for migration to new broadband Internet Protocol (IP) technologies. Support is needed for Oregon's four 911 centers and first responders to migrate from legacy systems to Next Generation 911 and to interoperable wireless broadband communications systems.
- **Agriculture** is emerging as an important application and may become the largest driver for broadband infrastructure deployment in rural areas of the state. State level engagement, support and technical assistance is needed.

- Local Community Broadband Planning: Local community engagement in broadband development, adoption and utilization continues to be a low-cost high return “game-changing” activity that needs to be promoted and supported.
- Federal Funding Programs: Federal broadband programs are a key source of available financing to be leveraged for new infrastructure. State support in the form of technical assistance and matching funds is needed for eligible applicants.
- Network Interconnection: Oregon needs to develop strategies to improve the state’s connectivity to national and global networks, improve network resilience and support the growth of network enabled data centers and e-commerce businesses.

Recommendations

The Council recommends that Oregon should:

- Provide and expand state funding for grant, loan and loan guarantee programs for broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas, for technical assistance and for matching funds to leverage federal funding programs.
- Provide support to low adopter underserved populations and community anchor institutions.
- Promote and support scalable broadband infrastructure deployment.
- Reduce barriers to broadband infrastructure deployment
- Promote and support digital inclusion and cyber security.
- Require that broadband infrastructure components be included for all state funded infrastructure projects including roads, bridges, water, and wastewater projects.
- Encourage public-private partnerships in broadband infrastructure that leverage limited state resources.
- Remain technology and provider neutral.

2020 Success Stories

Douglas Fast Net – a subsidiary of Douglas Electric Cooperative

- Built fiber to Saginaw, London, and Dorena elementary schools in the South Lane County School District
- Built fiber to the Wolf Creek Job Corps site outside of Glide
- Built more than 500 miles of new fiber network
- Rebuilt lost and damaged infrastructure from the Labor Day wildfires
- FTTH customers passed the 10,000 mark

Blue Mountain Networks – includes Axxis Communications, Eastern Oregon Telecom, and Gorge Networks.

- In 2020, built fiber to the home in Adams, Athena, and Weston, three wheat farming communities located halfway between Pendleton and Milton-Freewater.
- Fossil, Mitchell, and Spray are the three communities of Wheeler County, the least densely populated county in Oregon. It is 503 square miles bigger than the State of Rhode Island and only has about 1400 residents. They now have fiber to the home!

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I would like to quote the 2020 OBAC report to the legislature:

“Oregon has a long history of recognizing the importance of telecommunications and reflecting that importance in public policy. 2019 and 2020 have been pivotal years for Oregon’s broadband public policy and for state government engagement. Oregon needs to keep up this momentum. Though the disruptions of the pandemic will eventually pass, the social, economic, and equity issues that have been illuminated by the pandemic will remain. We must not lose our focus on them. We must respond to them today in ways that are not temporary, but in ways that will provide for long-term continuous support, development and improvement of broadband deployment, adoption and utilization for all Oregonians.”

[Quotes are from Broadband in Oregon: A Report of the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council, November 1, 2020.]

Respectfully,

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