

TESTIMONY OF MR. JOSEPH FRANELL
OREGON BROADBAND ADVISORY COUNCIL
Before the Senate Committee on Labor and Business

Thursday, March 18, 2021

Chair Riley, Vice-Chair Hansell and Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Joseph Franell, Chair of the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council www.broadband-oregon.org. The Oregon Broadband Advisory Council (OBAC) 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 to leverage the development and utilization of broadband for education, workforce development and telehealth, and to promote broadband utilization by citizens and communities. The council members represent Oregon's cities, counties, telecommunications service providers, Tribes, educators, economic development organizations, public safety agencies, healthcare providers, consumers and the public at large, the Oregon Department of Transportation, the Office of the state CIO, the Public Utility Commission, the state House of Representatives and the state Senate. 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 regret that I am unable to attend the public hearing today. I have provided written testimony for your reference regarding Senate Bill 615, which proposes to establish a Low Income Broadband Bill Payment Assistance Fund, and your interest in, "where income-based payment assistance fits in state's broadband development and utilization plans."

In its November 1, 2020 report to the Oregon Legislative Assembly on [Broadband in Oregon](#), OBAC restated its belief 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. In the 2020 report, "digital inclusion" was identified as a key broadband challenge and opportunity facing our state and that 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. It is within this area of digital inclusion and equity that Low Income Broadband Bill Payment Assistance resides.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has boldly illustrated that broadband internet access is essential and that closing the digital divide is critical. The challenge of the digital divide is usually described in terms of broadband telecommunications infrastructure, but the divide

also exists in unserved and underserved populations due to factors of income, education, age and ethnicity.

Broadband telecommunications is essential infrastructure and is required for economic and community development, but infrastructure does not create value unless it is put to use. Broadband availability *must* be followed by adoption and utilization if individuals, families and communities are to realize its benefits. One of the greatest barriers to adoption for low-income individuals and families is cost. They cannot afford it. Low Income Broadband Bill Payment Assistance programs enable low-income individuals and families to obtain access to this tremendous information utility that provides access to training, education, jobs and information needed to improve lives and prosperity. The internet has become *the platform* on which the world works, and broadband connectivity is essential for all Oregonians. Oregonians that do not have connectivity are at an immeasurable disadvantage.

In its 2020 report, OBAC recommended that Oregon provide support to low adopter underserved populations. It noted that Oregon's information and communication technology infrastructure *and* the capacity of Oregon to utilize these technologies for economic growth, community development and public safety is an important public policy issue. Not only is it important for individuals and families, but it will ultimately determine the state's future economic growth and development.

Respectfully,

Joseph Franell
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