



STATE OF MAINE
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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

**Testimony of Speaker Sara Gideon
In Support of LD 295
An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to
Increase Rural Maine's Access to Broadband Internet Service
Tuesday, February 19, 2019**

Senator Breen, Representative Gattine and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, I am Sara Gideon and I represent the town of Freeport, part of Pownal and I also have the distinct honor of serving as the Speaker of the Maine House. I submit this testimony in support of An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Increase Rural Maine's Access to Broadband Internet Service.

To put it simply, the bill you are considering is about basic infrastructure that is integral to our economy and our society.

In our modern world, business travels not just on roads and bridges but on digital highways as well. And with high quality broadband infrastructure in place, we know that Maine companies will be able to compete, new companies will build and expand, and talented young people will choose to come or to stay.

Access to high-speed reliable broadband internet is no longer an option or a luxury to be enjoyed by the lucky few; it's become critical to the success of our state. For our children, for our workers and for our businesses.

I'm proud to support this legislation for the workers who already live here and those who want to move here. As we all know, people no longer have to live where they work; they can work where they choose to live, as long as they connect reliably and seamlessly to their employers. Smart investments in connecting rural communities will allow for an influx of remote workers, which in turn will benefit the small businesses that populate our Main Streets.

I'm proud to support this legislation for our business community and our entrepreneurs. Because home grown businesses are born everywhere across this state, employing people who will drive the economy, populate and re-energize rural communities, and scale up into the technology driven employers of the future. These businesses deserve the same opportunities to succeed no matter where they are located.

While the economic case for increased broadband is compelling, perhaps more important in the long run is what this kind of access can mean to our kids. I believe, as I'm sure we all do, that no matter where they live, Maine's children should have the opportunity to access the best possible education. For this to be possible, our students and their teachers must have the sorts of modern tools and technology that fuel curiosity, encourage innovation and prepare them to compete in a global, fast moving world.

Broadband connectivity has become as basic a learning tool as a textbook and a kid in Calais should have the same opportunity to wield that tool as a kid in Freeport does. But far too many students across our state are experiencing the harsh reality of what's become known as the "homework gap" - the gulf between the ever increasing quantity of school work that requires a reliable home broadband connection and the stubborn fact that many kids simply don't have access where they live.

Without access at home, our kids are attempting to do research projects on a borrowed cell phone; sitting in their cars at night to access a wifi network at the library or local fast food restaurant, or, worse still, simply falling behind their classmates.

Because of thoughtful planning and smart investments, solving this problem is within our reach. The 1,100-mile statewide fiber optic network that is our own Three Ring Binder stretches dark fiber from Kittery to Fort Kent to Calais. Off ramps have been built in some places. Towns and universities, schools and libraries have gained access. Private providers have reached into many places where they can expect a reasonable return on investment, but the fact is, there remain too many areas and people who are underserved or unserved in our state.

It's critical that we connect them to the modern economy. And now is the time.

I'm confident the committee will consider these matters carefully and I respectfully ask that you support LD 295.