

129th Legislature
Senate of
Maine
Senate District 11
Waldo County

Senator Erin Herbig
3 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0003
(207)287-1515
Erin.Herbig@legislature.maine.gov

February 19, 2019

Testimony Presenting LD 354

An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Encourage the Provision of Reliable High-speed Internet in Rural Underserved Areas of Maine

Good morning Senator Breen, Representative Gattine and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. My name is Erin Herbig. In the Maine Senate, I proudly represent the people of all 26 towns in Waldo County: Belfast (my hometown), Belmont, Brooks, Burnham, Frankfort, Freedom, Islesboro, Jackson, Knox, Liberty, Lincolnville, Monroe, Montville, Morrill, Northport, Palermo, Prospect, Searsport, Searsport, Stockton Springs, Swanville, Thorndike, Troy, Unity, Waldo, and Winterport.

I come before you today to present LD 354: An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Encourage the Provision of Reliable High-speed Internet in Rural Underserved Areas of Maine.

We all know that our changing economy — including advancements in technology and trade — presents us with challenges. Too many Mainers and too many rural Maine towns have been left behind by these changes. That is unacceptable.

One of the most significant barriers to success in rural Maine is lack of access to reliable high-speed internet.

In Waldo County, it is not uncommon to see kids parked outside a town library or high school at 9:00 or 10:00 at night trying to complete homework or a college application because that is the only place they can connect to the internet. I am not okay with that.

Nor is it uncommon for a farmer to come in from the fields once the sun sets only to have to wait several hours until 11:00 or 12:00 at night to send invoices to their customers because a slow internet speed prevents them from doing so any earlier. I am not okay with that either.

Businesses contemplate leaving Waldo County because of the lack of bandwidth to compete in today's economy. Houses remain on the market because those homes are not connected to the internet and potential buyers need the ability to telecommute. And when a group of young families in Frankfort forms a group to organize for access to high-speed internet so they can

remain in their home town and encourage others to do the same, there are no resources to support their good efforts.

I recognize that this problem might be hard to understand unless you live it every day. At my home, I do not have access to high-speed internet. My family uses a cellular hot spot to conduct work from home and do homework. It is our only option. Depending on how much data we have used that month, I sometimes cannot open a Google Doc or email a photo because my connection is too slow. At those times, I go to a library, school, or café to do my job, just like thousands of other Mainers in this same situation in rural parts of our state.

Lack of access to reliable high-speed internet creates an incredible barrier to education, business growth, and economic activity in Waldo County and all rural, underserved parts of Maine.

Access to high-speed internet in today's economy is a utility, just as important as electricity or roads to access markets and participate in the economy.

LD 354 will create an important foundation for expanding high-speed internet access across Maine's most underserved and rural areas.

It is time for the state to invest in rural Maine's economic future, and access to reliable high-speed internet in underserved areas is arguably the most important aspect of that investment.

This bond, once passed by the voters, would disburse 20 million to the ConnectME Authority to increase access to reliable high-speed internet in rural, underserved areas.

It is my hope that this session we will focus on empowering rural communities to build independent, long lasting infrastructure that will bring back some of the Maine families we have lost.

High-speed internet access is a fundamental part of that infrastructure.

Thank you, and I would be happy to answer any questions.