



**Testimony of the Island Institute In Support of Funding for the ConnectMaine Authority as part of LD 221  
February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

Senator Breen, Representative Pierce, and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, my name is Nick Battista, and I am offering this testimony on behalf of the Island Institute in support of funding for the ConnectMaine Authority.

The Island Institute is a 37-year-old nonprofit organization, based in Rockland, Maine. We work to sustain Maine's island and coastal communities and are committed to a just, resilient, and vibrant future for the coast of Maine. We work in partnership with courageous leaders to support resilient communities and to confront a changing world.

The Island Institute's community development work focuses on - the marine economy, climate and energy pilots, small business, education and leadership. Broadband is foundational to all of this work and all Mainers need to have the ability to use high speed reliable internet. Since 2015, the Island Institute has supported 81 coastal and island communities, as well as several communities further inland as we know the solution to broadband hinges on a statewide effort. We have a community-driven broadband planning process and guide and we provide planning grants and capacity assistance to communities in our areas.

The Island Institute participates in state broadband discussions multiple ways - including being part of the Maine broadband coalition and also through my appointment as Chair of the ConnectMaine Authority Board.

Broadband is place-based infrastructure, it is built street by street, utility pole by utility pole. Your neighbor two streets over might have better service than you do, your neighbor 10 houses down the road might have worse service. Your ability to have a good internet connect depends on a company seeing the business case for making a capital investment or being willing to receive some sort of subsidy. For a company to invest capital, they have to get some sort of reasonable return on it.

Seventy-five percent of Maine's coastal communities have fewer than 3000 people. Twenty-five percent of coastal communities have fewer than 800 people. Rural Maine, particularly outside of town centers, does not have the population density to support significant private investment in broadband infrastructure. While Maine does have great internet service providers who have expanded their networks and built infrastructure in rural parts of the state, it is not reasonable to expect these private businesses alone to make the kinds of investments needed to move the state forward in a significant way.

Further, broadband is not a regulated utility – it is not like electricity or phone service where a monopoly is granted to a company with the understanding that in exchange for that monopoly, everybody in the area needs to be served. With broadband, nobody has to provide you with service.

Many communities are taking it upon themselves to understand the broadband challenges they face and how they could work to solve them. Some communities do this work on their own, some communities come together like Franklin county to do this work as a group. Community planning serves a couple of functions – best to think of it as the sticky tape for attracting private investment as well as laying the groundwork for municipal or other subsidies.

The rural character of communities isn't something that we can easily change to make a broadband investment more attractive but through community planning, you can start to shift the underlying economics of a broadband project by changing the number of people who take service and by reducing the private capital outlay necessary to build a project.

It shouldn't be up to communities and providers alone to solve the state's broadband challenges and this is where ConnectMaine comes in to support various forms of public-private partnerships that allow for connectivity to expand beyond what the market would otherwise serve.

Supporting the development of these partnerships takes resources. Supporting the building of these projects takes even more resources. ConnectMaine provides grants to reduce the capital outlay only for broadband projects being built in parts of the state with worse internet than I had growing up in Falmouth in the late 90s.

Last summer the \$15M broadband bond showed how critical broadband is to all Mainers with 75% of voters, or over 230,000 Mainers, saying yes to better internet. This was a good first step but connecting the 83,000 or more still-unserved households requires a more significant state investment as well as additional capital from the private sector, municipalities and the philanthropic community.

It also requires continued investment in the ConnectMaine Authority to help support communities going through the planning process and to help foster effective public-private partnerships that allow limited state funds to be stretched further.

As you well know, high speed internet is extremely important to daily life. The pandemic highlights how important broadband is to helping people work remotely, making sure students can attend schools, keeping people connected with their families, and assuring that government can continue to function.

I urge you to support both the proposed funding and corrected language for the ConnectMaine Authority.