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LD 1975

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Testimony in Opposition of LD 1975: An Act to Eliminate the ConnectMaine Authority by Repealing the Advanced Technology Infrastructure Act

Senator Lawrence, Representative Sachs, member of the Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee, I am Peggy Schaffer and I am testifying in opposition to LD 1975: An Act to Eliminate the ConnectMaine Authority by Repealing the Advanced Technology Infrastructure Act.

I am retired, but previously I was the Director of the Connect Maine Authority. Before I retired in 2022, I helped create the Maine Connectivity Authority with Heather Johnson, the Commissioner of DECD.

We knew that spring that there was substantial funding coming to Maine and at the time we believed there would be a need for rapid deployment. The Connect Maine statute is simply not built for that. We did discuss repealing the ConnectMaine statute at that time.

We did not do that for three main reasons.

Connect Maine has just been awarded a \$29M federal grant that the Feds strongly suggested NOT moving to a new organization.

ConnectME had gotten voter approved bond funds that were to go to Connect Maine, not a successor.

The Connect Maine Fund. This was a hard fought victory to put a very small fee (10 cents) on users bills. We knew that moving that fund to a new entity would bring back all these battles and endanger that critical funding.

Those three reasons still exist today. I just went to the last ribbon cutting for the \$29M grant in Isle au Haut this July. The final work on the projects funded by the bond are also just finishing up. It takes longer to build this infrastructure than one would imagine.

And the need for ongoing funding for broadband connectivity has only increased, as the ongoing need for community engagement and support has now been defunded by the NTIA.

Over the past three years, Maine Connectivity Authority undertook a significant effort to engage communities to ensure all community members could take true advantage of the connectivity that federal funds would bring. The resulting Digital Equity Plan was a comprehensive strategy to bring devices, education and other needed support so all community members could be prepared to enter the “digital economy”.

Those funds, some \$35 M over 5 years, are now gone. But the plan and the need is not.

Broadband advocates have always talked about digital connectivity as a many legged stool. First you need a connection. Then you need a device, Then you need to know how to use that device in a safe manner. Finally, you need to be able to afford that connection.

Even if (and its a big if) the much reduced federal fund does bring everyone a quality high speed connection, the other four things still exist. Without those, we are just connecting people so they can watch Netflix, and not realizing the true economic potential that we in Maine recognized when we created the ConnectME authority in 2010 and created and then expanded the funding for those efforts.

Repealing this statute will end any funding Maine has to ensure people can use the internet for its real potential.

It's a tiny fee. I know providers say it's a burden to their customers. But it's 10 cents a month. My cell phone carrier charges MORE to collect the fee than the fee itself. My internet provider has raised their prices \$5.00 a month for the past several years.

Those are a real burden on customers, not the 10 cents per month.

I urge you to vote ONTP this legislation. While on the surface, there does appear to be duplicity, in reality, there are many solid excellent reasons the statute and the fee should remain.

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