

Maine Broadband Coalition
Testimony in Opposition to LD 422
March 2, 2023

Good afternoon Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government: my name is Myles Smith, I am a resident of Portland, and the Executive Director of the Maine Broadband Coalition. I am here today to testify in opposition to LD 422."

For several years, the Maine Broadband Coalition has been advocating for ubiquitous broadband availability, affordability, and adoption in Maine. In fact, we're simply not there yet and this legislation, if passed, will have a huge impact on citizens throughout the state.

Regarding broadband availability, 18% of locations in Maine are unserved with adequate broadband, according to data from the FCC and found on the Maine Connectivity Authority website. This means many thousands of Mainers do not even have the option to pay for internet service that would be sufficient to engage in public and civic life.

Even for those of us who have adequate service availability, adoption and affordability are also concerns. Between 13 and 15% of Mainers are in danger of not being able to afford broadband, according to the FCC's definitions. Over 66,000 Mainers are enrolled in the federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), but funding for it is on track to expire next year, which risks putting thousands of these folks offline. Additionally, as Maine is one of the oldest states in the country, there is a large population of 'non-digital natives' who struggle to navigate the internet, and have never used it as a way to keep track of local affairs. Several federal, philanthropic, and state-funded programs are helping to bridge this digital divide, but it's still a long way to go before everyone has the skills they need to find and engage with information the ways that many of us have been doing through their local newspapers.

We also see this digital divide play out in our local governments. Last week, reviewing state records, I found 176 Maine municipalities do not even have a town website, and some do not even have an email address. These are places that need more support before they are able to engage with their constituents only over the internet. We encourage the state to find ways to support local governments, especially in rural areas, to help them catch up.

Until such time that everyone in the State has adequate broadband connectivity, and municipalities and counties are able to maintain adequate websites, and everyone knows how to navigate and engage with the internet, removing the requirement to print municipal public notices in newspapers is taking away the right to know for tens of thousands of Maine citizens.

On behalf of the Maine Broadband Coalition and all the Mainers who cannot access reliable broadband for whatever reason, I ask that you vote 'ought not to pass' on LD 422. Democracy depends on it.

Thank you.

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