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Introduction to LD 1975

An Act to Eliminate the ConnectMaine Authority by Repealing the Advanced Technology Infrastructure Act

Chair Lawrence, Chair Sachs, honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology. I am Representative Jack Ducharme and I proudly represent the towns of Madison, Norridgewock and Cornville, Maine. I am here today to introduce my bill, LD 1975, An Act to Eliminate the ConnectMaine Authority by Repealing the Advanced Technology Infrastructure Act. The Advanced Technology Infrastructure Act was enacted in 2015 to help Maine communities become connected to broadband and high-speed internet service.

LD 1975 proposes to repeal the ConnectME Authority (ConnectME) because its function has been absorbed by its successor, Maine Connectivity Authority (MCA). Further, the funding stream for MCA has been bolstered by federal dollars flowing into the State of Maine for the purpose of enhancing broadband access and high-speed internet development in unserved areas of the state.

The statutory purpose of ConnectME is as follows:

§9204-A. Duties of authority

1. Establish criteria defining unserved and underserved areas. The authority, by rule adopted pursuant to section 9205, subsection 3, shall establish criteria to define unserved and underserved areas with respect to broadband service. The authority shall use these criteria to determine those areas of the State that are unserved or underserved. **COMPLETE**

[PL 2015, c. 284, §7 (NEW).]

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2. Promote use of broadband service. The authority shall promote use of broadband service by identifying and sharing best practices that encourage use of broadband service, eliminating barriers to use of broadband service and facilitating and supporting public-private partnerships to increase use of broadband service. **COMPLETE**

[PL 2015, c. 284, §7 (NEW).]

3. Support local and regional broadband planning. The authority shall provide technical and planning support and approve financial assistance to communities in the State that include unserved and underserved areas to identify the need for broadband infrastructure and services and develop and implement plans to meet those needs. **COMPLETE**

[PL 2019, c. 343, Pt. QQ, §3 (AMD).]

4. Support broadband investment. The authority shall expand the availability of broadband service to residential and small business customers in unserved or underserved areas by identifying, developing and providing funding for broadband investments in unserved and underserved communities. Such investments may include infrastructure that is used by a single provider or by multiple providers. **COMPLETE WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MAINE CONNECTIVITY AUTHORITY**

[PL 2015, c. 284, §7 (NEW).]

5. Facilitate state support of deployment of broadband infrastructure. The authority shall review, recommend and facilitate changes in laws, rules, programs and policies of the State and its agencies to further deployment of broadband infrastructure to all unserved and underserved areas of the State. The authority shall assist in identifying opportunities to use broadband infrastructure to achieve the state policies and goals as set out in section 9202-A and support coordination between communications providers and state and local governmental entities on initiatives where broadband infrastructure could be advanced. **COMPLETE WITH THE ONGOING GOAL PASSED ON TO THE SUCCESSOR AGENCY, MAINE CONNECTIVITY AUTHORITY**

[PL 2019, c. 343, Pt. QQ, §4 (AMD).]

There are two revenue streams for ConnectME funding. First, there is a quarter of a percent fee assessed on video, VOIP and satellite services. Secondly, there is a \$.10 fee on each line of VOIP and mobile service. These fees were to be part of a fund that was to be used to expand broadband infrastructure for unserved Mainers.

These assessments generate approximately \$2 million annually, extracted from the wallets of hard-working Mainers. These funds are simply transferred into Maine Connectivity Authority by virtue of the 2022 service agreement between ConnectME and MCA. In 2022, ConnectME signed a service contract with the Maine Connectivity Authority (MCA) to take over its duties, streamline operations, and better leverage federal funding. MCA continues to award grants and work on broadband infrastructure projects. MCA has already allocated over \$250 million to 100 projects in Maine. Additionally, they were allocated \$270 million in BEAD funding. They have submitted

their BEAD plan to NTIA, which was for \$46 million to address the final 22,000 -26,000 thousand passing in Maine that were BEAD eligible. This comes with additional funding for administration. We have already had discussions with MCA about, should there be a future need for additional dollars we can discuss it at that time.

MCA has found great success in leveraging the federal investments allocated to Maine to create connectivity for every resident who wants it in Maine. If you look at the current broadband availability map of Maine, you will see that except in some very remote areas of the state, there is access to broadband available. Even the most remote areas can now be covered by satellite service. Now that this goal that the Governor set for Maine has been achieved, there is an opportunity to save our citizens over \$2 Million a year by repealing these fees. This might be an effective offset to the new streaming tax enacted in the first session of the 132nd Legislature.

We understand that ConnectME has several ongoing project grants that need completed prior to repeal. There are also several statutes that should be included in the MCA statute. For this reason, we would be supportive of creating a sunset for ConnectME. Maine does not need two broadband authorities in the long term.

To be clear, LD 1975 will not repeal the Maine Connectivity Authority. It will simply clean up the regulations and funding streams that flow into MCA. ConnectME was established for a clear purpose. That purpose has been either completed in most cases or been taken over by MCA.

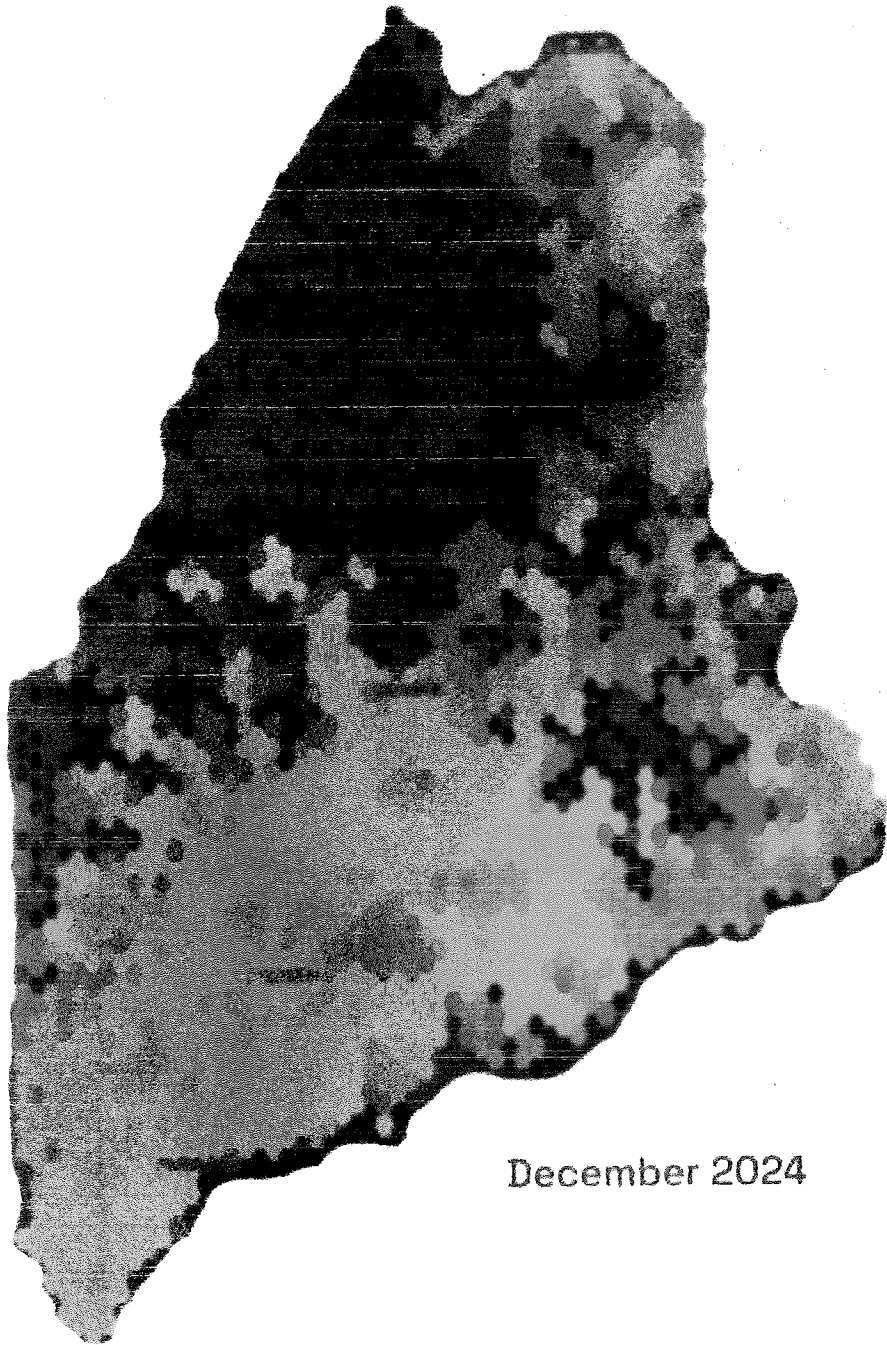
State programs often end up being modified or changed but the funding stream is merely diverted to a different program without thought as to the effect on the Maine citizens who pay the bills. This repeal bill will remove the enacting legislation and hence the monthly assessment from Mainer's phone bills for ConnectME, a program that has been wholly absorbed into MCA.

I ask for your support of this small effort to help hardworking Mainers make ends meet in these challenging times. Repealing ConnectME will not hurt the broadband access of Maine people. It will simply put a few dollars more into their pocket to help pay their bills.

Cordially,

Jack Ducharme

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December 2024

*Service classification based on V1-V6 FCC
Broadband Data Collection.*

- Served (100/100 Mbps)
- Underserved (<100/100 Mbps, >100/20Mbps)
- Unserved (<100/20 Mbps)