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**Testimony of Senator Harold “Trey” Stewart
Presenting L.D. 1107, An Act To Create Needed Broadband Infrastructure in Rural Maine
through the Establishment of a Satellite-based Broadband Grant Program
Before the Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee
April 6, 2021**

Senator Lawrence, Representative Berry and members of the Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee: I am State Senator Trey Stewart and I have the distinction of representing 51 communities in Aroostook and Penobscot Counties. I am before you today to present L.D. 1107, An Act To Create Needed Broadband Infrastructure in Rural Maine through the Establishment of a Satellite-based Broadband Grant Program.

As you have all seen play out over the past month or so, there’s an interest among myself and my colleagues in working with satellite internet providers to address the “last mile” issue facing Maine and broadband access. Ideally, this bill would come out in advance of the budgeting process that this committee undertook, and the voice of minority Republicans would have been more seriously considered as a part of the biennial budget. Given that both of those things didn’t occur, we are now having this discussion after the fact today- though it is no less significant a conversation to have.

To be sure, minority Republicans represent rural parts of the state. You hear this when we introduce ourselves at the beginning of each hearing. As stated before, I represent 51 communities in Northern Maine, geographically 50 times larger than my House district I previously represented in one of the only two populous areas of my district. This does not mean, however, that the people who don’t live in larger towns or along busy traffic corridors matter any less or should be less of a priority for connectivity. In fact, I would argue just the opposite. We should be doing all that we can to ensure that our rural counterparts have the same opportunities to live and work in rural Maine, not just in the urban parts of our state. In my opinion, population shortages in the rural parts of our state are the single-greatest threat to the residence there, as it makes everything about living there more challenging and has a spiraling impact on life there.

As such, we put forward this measure this year. This bill explores the idea of doing all we can to reduce barriers to connectivity, and do so in a way that’s affordable and makes sense financially. As you’ll see from this bill and recall from our previous conversation around this issue during the budget, there are technologies that are developing in the world of satellite internet that are worth exploring. If you live down the end of a long road in rural Maine and are presently unserved or underserved, it will cost a utility roughly \$20,000 per mile to connect that home directly with fiber. This amount does not include the monthly payments owed to the company after that connectivity. This bill proposes a different route.

By providing for the initial up-front costs of satellite infrastructure- synonymous with the state paying the infrastructure costs to hardline cables and polls around the state- we can make great strides to serve these people. While it costs tens of thousands of dollars to connect remote Mainers with fiber, it costs hundreds to utilize other methods to ensure the same level of connectivity. As the bill states, a \$500 reimbursement for the satellite infrastructure will allow these individuals who are truly unserved and underserved who are the lowest of priority for connectivity with ConnectME and others the chance to be treated fairly.

Obviously, StarLink is one such example of a company that would make sense to experiment with this initiative. With a small investment, relative to the amount provided to other carriers, we could see literally thousands of Maine people connected to high-speed internet. We are particularly well-suited for this venture, given the geographic roll-out of this company's efforts with regard to satellite launches and on-lining efforts, meaning that we, as a state, should be working particularly hard to ensure that those Maine citizens who need a service that they offer are able to access it- with the same level of commitment as we provide other users of the Internet. To be sure, this bill and this effort and attention is about a certain degree of parity- we aren't saying one is better than the other, just that we should be utilizing every tool in the toolbox and not precluding Maine people who will be excluded because of one algorithm or another. I hope we can build a broad team- one that includes every provider possible in some meaningful way.

I want to be clear, that this initiative in this legislation in no way is meant to circumvent the critical investments in fiber that need to still be made across Maine. I recognize that need to make these investments if we hope to broaden the reach of broadband across Maine and through a variety of technologies. However, where it makes sense to utilize these options with a level of state support that is small- relative to other investments in the same space- but effective with regard to connectivity, we can accomplish both goals. There needs to be a balance struck with regard to the cost to connection ratio.

I appreciate this committee's time and consideration of this important legislation and look forward to answering questions that you have at this time.