

Senator Richard A. Bennett

3 State House Station

Augusta, ME 04333-0003

Office (207) 287-1505

Cell (207) 592-3200

Richard.Bennett@legislature.maine.gov

Environment and Natural Resources Committee
Government Oversight Committee

Testimony of Senator Richard A. Bennett
before the Joint Standing on Energy, Utilities and Technology
LD 1484, An Act To Enhance the ConnectMaine Authority's Capacity
To Provide World-class Internet
April 27, 2021

Senator Lawrence, Representative Berry, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology: My name is Rick Bennett, I live in Oxford, and I have the honor of representing the beautiful foothills and lakes region of western Maine in the State Senate. I am pleased to introduce LD 1484, An Act To Enhance the ConnectMaine Authority's Capacity To Provide World-class Internet.

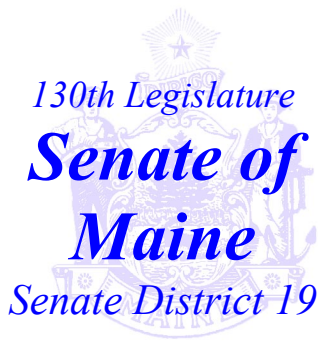
I am honored that this bill is cosponsored by my fellow co-chairs of the Legislature's Broadband Caucus – Rep. Seth Berry, Sen. Chloe Maxmin, and Rep. Tom Skolfield. Over the past several weeks, I have also been pleased to have had the opportunity to work with Governor Mills and Commissioner of DECD Heather Johnson on perfecting the measure before you. So today I present an amendment which is intended to replace the printed bill.

This legislation has the promise of making every corner of Maine inviting and prosperous. The reality is that nobody will consider moving to a community without high-speed reliable internet. The very survival of many towns across our state is at stake with the decisions we make.

The pandemic has underscored the disparities of who gets to communicate and who doesn't. Nobody should be left behind in the digital age. This includes small businesspeople trying to reach customers, students struggling to learn remotely, rural patients pursuing state-of-the-art tele-health options, and older people trying to keep in touch with family during the pandemic. Their need is urgent, and the time is now for a bold, bipartisan initiative.

Happily, we will soon receive, perhaps as early as next month, over \$120 million in targeted broadband funding through the American Rescue Act. In addition to the federal money coming, I believe unrestricted state funds, such as the \$100 million I have proposed in LD 1235, that is supported by the Legislature's Broadband Caucus and the Maine Broadband Coalition, should be deployed as well. This will make a substantial down-payment on the estimated \$600 million that our Maine Broadband Plan predicts is required to accomplish the task of connecting Maine completely. These dollars available are as unprecedented as the opportunity.

Such vast but vital sums spent smartly, swiftly and wholly in the public interest. This legislation we present today will accomplish this goal through the creation of a new, nimble, quasi-



Senator Richard A. Bennett

3 State House Station

Augusta, ME 04333-0003

Office (207) 287-1505

Cell (207) 592-3200

Richard.Bennett@legislature.maine.gov

Environment and Natural Resources Committee

Government Oversight Committee

governmental agency to work with private companies and public entities to insure complete coverage of Maine with reliable, high-speed internet as soon as possible.

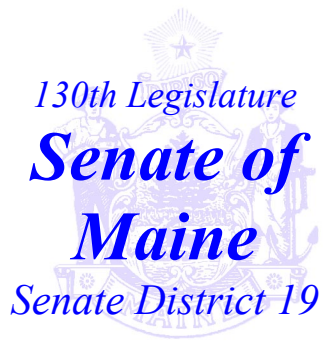
Let me take you through some of the details:

- The amendment will create a new agency, the Maine Connectivity Authority (MCA), a quasi-public agency modelled after other effective, task-oriented organizations, such as the Maine Technology Institute.
- The MCA will be governed by a 7-member board, including four appointed by the Governor, 2 recommended by the presiding officers of the Legislature, and the Commissioner of the Department of Economic and Community Development.
- The President will be appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Legislature. All other staffing will be determined by the President and the board.
- The current ConnectMaine Authority will become part of this new agency.
- The MCA will have the strategic breadth and tactical tools to get the job done, including the ability to own real or personal property, to make and execute contracts with other entities, to build and maintain dark fiber, to issue revenue bonds and other debt instruments, to hold securities and equity instruments, to sue, and to collect fees and provide financing.
- Very importantly, the MCA will be able to collect data about current internet availability, making sure the confidentiality of that information is protected.
- The MCA will report annually to the Legislature on its progress.
- And in 2030, nine years from now, the Authority will be assessed in a “sunset review” by the Legislature, so there will be a specific decision made about the agency’s continuation, abolishment, or transformation.

Obviously, during this pandemic we’ve learned much and we’ve lost much. We have learned again our need to see, talk, and have long, intimate conversations with our loved ones. This has been especially poignant for isolated people who haven’t been hugged in a long time.

We have learned again that the ability of someone with mobility issues, getting along in years and who lives in a rural area, to look in the eye of a top doctor, is tremendously liberating, hopeful and enlivening.

Widespread high-speed internet will help stanch the brain drain of young professionals leaving the state for jobs and help people in Maine build futures here. We all know stories of our kids and grandkids being kicked out of their offices in New York and Boston and told to work



Senator Richard A. Bennett
3 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0003
Office (207) 287-1505
Cell (207) 592-3200
Richard.Bennett@legislature.maine.gov

Environment and Natural Resources Committee
Government Oversight Committee

remotely. Many are taking the chance to move back to Maine, to family, to our small towns, to our magnificent outdoors.

We can and we must seize this unique moment and embrace this opportunity. In my view, it is the Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal for this Legislature. We can set Maine apart and launch a brighter, more prosperous future.

Thank you.