

Maine public advocate: Vote ‘yes’ on 1 to invest in better broadband for rural Maine

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By Barry Hobbins Special to the Press Herald

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On July 14, Maine voters can approve \$15 million for badly needed rural broadband expansion through a bond issue.

Voting “yes” is a step in the right direction, though far more needs to be done to extend broadband across Maine, which state officials estimate will cost \$150 million to \$450 million. Maine’s rural broadband challenge requires a much larger effort, leveraging state and federal funds, plus private investment, to wire our far-flung communities. We can’t do this alone.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barry Hobbins is the Public Advocate of Maine. He was chair of the Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee several times as a state legislator, while serving over 25 years as both a state senator and state representative.

We need to think big and get the policy right.

The ConnectME Authority reports that most Maine residents and homes – 93 percent of them – have broadband connections. That’s great. But only 75 percent of us subscribe. Not so great. As an Obama administration study found in 2015, most non-subscribers throughout the nation don’t think the internet is relevant to their daily lives.

To help financially squeezed households, many internet providers discount broadband at \$10 a month for low-income families, but more needs to be done. If we’re going to fix the “digital divide,” we need to address the 27 percent who mostly have access to broadband but don’t subscribe to it.

It’s a significant challenge on many fronts. In rural areas of Maine, 24 percent of the young people are growing up in families without computers at home.

Our starting point should be investing in digital literacy, from our young people to mature workers and retirees. This skill set is indispensable for future educational and employment opportunities. But 75 percent of American fifth- and eighth-graders are “non-proficient” in 21st-century digital skills, according to a recent multi-year survey by the digital education clearinghouse Learning.com.

From telecommuting to telemedicine, Mainers should understand that their lives and livelihoods can depend on digital connectivity and digital know-how. None of this will be easy. But it is essential, as underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted postponing the referendum from June 2.

We also must focus on those rural communities that don’t have broadband connections because it’s cost-prohibitive to wire them. Some 180,000 residents, about 13 percent of our population, have no internet or only low-speed connections.

The digital divide has many dimensions. When Maine schools shut down in March, educators discovered that 20 percent of students couldn’t go online. Some didn’t have computers, some don’t have digital literacy and some don’t have connections. So they weren’t learning.

Because of these inequities, several school districts, including Augusta’s, were hesitant to adopt distance learning, fearing it would exacerbate educational inequalities. With education moving online, surveys showed that educators, parents and students were ill-prepared. Educators and parents often don’t comprehend the digital world in a way that relates to millennials and members of Generation Z (born after 1996).

The problem is complex, but getting Maine fully wired with broadband is a critical start. We are the nation’s most rural state, with a dispersed and disproportionately older population. Our terrain is magnificent but daunting: rocks, mountains, forests and island communities. That makes Maine difficult to wire. It’s a financial challenge for broadband providers to extend services to every Mainer.

Passing the referendum is critical, because it will jump-start additional state appropriations, potentially spurring federal funding from economic stimulus programs. These public funds should encourage the private investment we urgently need for fully wiring Maine.

Starting this process will also help get needed federal funds that Congress appropriated in the various COVID-19 stimulus bills.

We also need to be attentive and avoid the mistakes made in the 2009 economic stimulus program, when broadband buildout failed to prioritize unserved communities, and wasted billions of dollars favoring politically connected companies. Many special interests still try to use the Eligible Telecommunications Carrier requirements as a stalking horse to keep

cost-competitive rivals excluded from federal contracts badly needed in Maine.

Everyone who's survived a Maine winter, especially in an isolated inland or island community, knows how to overcome challenges. Bringing broadband to all our homes and towns, businesses and communities will be challenging, to say the least.

With adequate resources and smart policies, we can get the job done and build a better, broadband-connected future for ourselves and our children and grandchildren. Let's get started. I hope you'll join me in voting "yes" on July 14.

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