

Commentary: Help close the Maine broadband gap – vote for expansion bond

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By John DoughertySpecial to the Press
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BANGOR — Maine needs better and faster broadband. We have all heard these words before, but what our Maine residents, along with the rest of the country, are currently experiencing during this pandemic proves the need beyond any question.

Just think of what we did in a matter of a few weeks. All the schools closed, forcing students and teachers to resume education from their homes (if they could). Higher education institutions followed the same model, moving all classes online. Likewise, businesses large and small, and government at every level had to transition most, if not all, employees to work from home models.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In addition to being on the front lines of the pandemic, health care providers had to simultaneously and exponentially increase telemedicine services to care for patients in their homes and protect the public. For instance, Northern Light Health had 7,500 telemedicine sessions in all of 2019, but in April of this year the system had more than 35,000. In Jackman, Penobscot Community Health Care is piloting a telemedicine program with North East Mobile Health Services and the town to maintain 24/7 coverage at the Jackman Community Health Center. Demands placed on health care providers were and remain incredible.

Our homes became offices, boardrooms, classrooms and lecture halls with up to three to five devices online throughout the day. Home internet was instantly transformed from a predominantly entertainment-focused utility to a functional necessity. Most of us had never had this need for our internet on such a consistent basis, nor had we ever put this much demand on our home internet service.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Mission Broadband Inc. – a Maine consulting firm that works with towns, counties and other political subdivisions to improve broadband access – is conducting a statewide survey to measure the experiences of Mainers who were forced by the pandemic to work, learn and receive health care from home.

What we are learning is unfortunately not a surprise. In a state as rural and dispersed as Maine, too many residents are still unable to access reliable internet service at the bandwidth they need. Some Mainers still have no access at all.

Six percent of respondents have no available broadband service, and 35 percent responded that their current services do not meet their needs. Sixty percent stated they were telecommuting for work, 34 percent have K-12 students at home and 27 percent are trying to use their broadband for telehealth services.

Metaphorically speaking, the issue is not the highway. The backbone of Maine’s internet service is very robust and has not missed a beat during this or any other surge in usage. The issue continues to be completing the difficult last mile to your home or business.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Funding is key. Our Maine Legislature in Augusta and our federal delegation in Washington continue to debate the issue of funding. We must let them know that having reliable and affordable internet is no longer something we desire to watch Netflix, it is a necessity for our livelihood, our education, our health care and our economy. The urgency you experience daily must translate into an urgency to fix the problem now.

To that end, we implore you to let your town leaders, your state legislators and our federal delegation know how critical broadband is for you, your family and your business. You can also take direct action by voting for the broadband expansion bond on the July 14 ballot, supporting a continuation of the work ConnectME does for expanding broadband infrastructure. The broadband expansion bond – Question 1 – directs \$15 million to be combined with an additional \$30 million in federal, private, local and other funds for development of high-speed internet infrastructure for unserved and underserved areas of Maine.

Our current situation has laid bare the existence of a digital divide that must be bridged with the last mile of broadband infrastructure so that every Mainer has internet access. It must also be reliable and affordable and meet today’s needs if we are to realize tomorrow’s economy. A “Social Distancing Broadband Impact” survey can be filed out at www.missionbroadband.com, to help obtain additional timely data.

All Mainers need access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet – a necessity of life.

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