

April 12, 2021

The Honorable John Boozman,
Shelley Moore Capito, Amy Klobuchar,
and Angus King
Co-Chairs
Senate Broadband Caucus
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Adam Kinzinger, Bob Latta,
Tom O'Halleran, Mark Pocan, Peter Welch,
and Rob Wittman
Co-Chairs
House Rural Broadband Caucus
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressional Broadband Leaders,

Every American deserves access to high-speed broadband, and we write today to share our perspective on these issues as you undertake infrastructure legislation in Congress. Connect the Future is a new coalition working to deliver on the vast promise of technology to create opportunities for all Americans – especially in rural areas. Our goal is to raise awareness and promote solutions that will expand broadband connectivity to unserved households, businesses, and anchor institutions across the country.

It's now apparent that Americans need high-quality broadband connections to perform basic tasks – distance learning, remote work, telemedicine doctor's appointments, even efficient farming and small business sales. When the pandemic finally passes, their reliance on their broadband connections may lessen, but it will remain critical. Unfortunately, too many people and anchor institutions across the country—especially in rural areas where 1 in 5 are without access—continue to be left-behind.¹

As we work to bridge the digital divide, Congress should consider solutions to address the impediments and cost drivers that can stand in the way of successful broadband deployment. Doing so will ensure that funding for broadband infrastructure – both public and private capital – is maximized for actual and timely deployment. One such opportunity that is particularly deserving of and ripe for Congressional attention is access to utility poles. Utility poles form the backbone of America's broadband infrastructure and are critically important for enabling connectivity across the nation, especially in rural areas.

In particular, the process of adding new broadband infrastructure to existing poles is complex, costly, time consuming, and inconsistent, often creating needless obstacles to bringing broadband to the communities that need it most. Some pole owners inequitably demand that new attachers pay the entire cost of replacing poles, in many cases even when they are damaged or beyond their useful life. These unreasonable demands lead to disputes that slow and shift resources away from deploying broadband – they can significantly delay or even derail projects entirely.

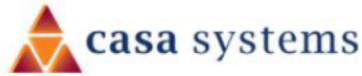
We need utility pole access reform that ensures timely access, fair cost sharing, and expedited resolution of disputes. This will maximize both public and private dollars devoted to deployment. Every dollar wasted on navigating this burdensome process is a dollar that cannot be used to connect unserved households, small businesses, and anchor institutions.

Congress is on the cusp of a once in a generation opportunity to close the digital divide. In order to fully maximize these infrastructure investments in broadband, particularly in rural areas, we urge Congress to act now to ensure a fast, fair process for utility pole access, replacements, and dispute resolution for broadband infrastructure. Updating our laws to match today's digital landscape will remove the unnecessary barriers and speed broadband investment and deployment in unserved, often rural, communities.

¹ Source: FCC: 14th Broadband Deployment Report (Data for 2019, Released 01/19/21, Page 20, Fig. 1) (17.3% of Americans ("nearly 1 in 5") lack access to high-speed broadband.)]

We look forward to working with you to help to connect more Americans without delay.

Thank you,



Texas State Grange