

Testimony for House Bill 97

Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion

Dr. Christine L Bergmark and Brett Grohsgal
48322 Far Cry Road
Lexington Park, Maryland 20653

January 22, 2021

This letter is in support of **House Bill 97: Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion.**

We fully support extending deployment of broadband Internet services to under-served, or in our case, not served at all, areas. Many rural voters and taxpayers have advocated for this for years at the local, state and federal levels. We need this for our rural businesses like ours, access to on-line education for our youth, and access to information for everyone in the county. As a nation, as a state, and as local businesses, we need affordable, unlimited, high-speed fiber internet access.

Many households in our rural county of St. Mary's County do not have any broadband access. Over the years since we purchased our farm and moved to the county in 1996, I have called our economic development office and our local internet providers to see what it would cost to bring internet access to our farm (we are literally the "last mile", being about about 1/2 mile off the grid).

When the FCC switched television wavelengths several years ago, we lost access to television - which we, as a farm business, relied on for news and vital weather. Just to bring internet cable to our business, the quotes ranged from \$36,000 in 2000 to \$29,000 in 2019. Most people can't pay that and neither could we. Even though a Rural Broadband Initiative for Southern Maryland was established years ago, it seems the main goal was to improve access for the Patuxent Naval Air Base and local colleges. In spite of the many dollars spent, most businesses and residences remained unserved.

This need is not a luxury. Our daughter's school is on-line. Educating all citizens is critical for future economic growth. Our business accounts are on-line. Our banking and meetings are now all on-line. The only access we have for internet and news access is through a Verizon portable hotspot. It generally works. And often does not. It is challenged. We are not alone. The rural core of American agriculture and manufacturing is not being served

While some areas are fighting for faster internet access, many households still have none. Roosevelt established the Rural Electrification Act. That cost a lot. We must do even better and it will be less expensive. Equal access to broadband must be a priority for the nation and for each state - not just for our rural businesses today, but for our future economy. Without affordable, unlimited, high-speed fiber internet access, our children are choosing not to live in rural Maryland. Our communities will die.

Please support HB 97 to establish an office that will work not only with rural jurisdictions but with every county in the State to bring digital access to every household.

Dr. Christine L Bergmark and Brett Grohsgal