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Committee: Economic Matters

Testimony on: HB97 “Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion - Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: January 26, 2021

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports HB97, establishing the Office of Digital Inclusion with the mission of ensuring universal access to high-quality, reliable, and affordable broadband internet.

Much of the value of broadband internet is well publicized. However, the burgeoning public health and environmental benefits are less recognized. Largely enabled by broadband, telework expanded dramatically in 2020 due to the pandemic. Much of that shift is expected to be permanent. Global Workplace Analytics (GWA), the widely cited research-based consulting firm focused on the future of work, finds that only workers 3% of remote want to return to full-time office work and that employers can save an average of \$11,000 annually for each employee working remotely 2-3 days per week.¹ Telework in turn creates large public health and environmental benefits, stemming primarily from reduced vehicle traffic. Using GWA’s methodology², the potential *annual* impacts in Maryland are:

- 2 billion fewer vehicle miles traveled
- 128 million vehicle trips avoided
- 860,000 tons of greenhouse gases avoided
- Significant reductions in smog and other unhealthy air pollution.

The expansion of telework adds to broadband’s importance but threatens to widen the digital divide. Communities and individuals lacking access are now at an added disadvantage. Many rural areas lack affordable broadband, but gaps exist in every county and throughout the state among low income and disadvantaged communities. Notably, in Baltimore City, 96,000 (41%) of households in 2018 lacked wireline internet.³ Ensuring universal affordable access is central to improving social and economic justice.

Broadband internet is now fundamental for individual opportunity and Maryland’s economic prosperity while also improving public health and our environment. It is vital that *all* Marylanders have an equal shot at such opportunity and prosperity. We urge the committee to issue a favorable report on this legislation.

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¹ “The Business Case for Remote Work,” Kate Lister, Global Workplace Analytics, Jan 2021

² “2017 State of Telecommuting in the U.S. Employee Workforce,” Global Workplace Analytics and flexjobs

³ “Baltimore’s Digital Divide: Gaps in Internet Connectivity and the Impact on Low-Income City Residents.” John B. Horrigan, Ph.D. for Abell Foundation, May 2020

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 75,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.