



September 11, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Governor of Texas
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, Texas 78711-2428

Governor Abbott,

We are grateful and appreciative of your leadership as the State of Texas continues to experience new challenges brought by the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has also exacerbated existing disparities across the state, one being rural broadband. We, the undersigned, are writing to request your leadership and support in developing a statewide broadband plan.

As you are aware, broadband is more important than ever during these unprecedented times, and we applaud the steps you have taken in closing the digital divide in Texas. The Governor's Broadband Development Council is exploring barriers impacting unserved areas, and your partnership with the Texas Education Agency forming Operation Connectivity helped provide mobile hotspots and e-learning devices for students and families as they transitioned to remote learning.

However, we fear that rural communities are continuing to be left behind. For example, Operation Connectivity's plan primarily benefited those households with broadband infrastructure and/or cellular availability. Many rural students live in areas where neither broadband nor cellular service is available. Students, families, and schools in rural communities without this critical infrastructure were left to address the situation on their own. It is also our understanding that the Governor's Broadband Development Council is not charged with developing a state broadband plan, which is an important first step to closing the digital divide in Texas.

According to recent data and maps produced by Connected Nation Texas, more than 800,000 rural Texans do not have adequate broadband infrastructure, thus limiting their access to telework or essential services, such as remote learning and telemedicine¹. Additionally, the number of rural communities left behind increases as broadband speeds increase. We fear that technological advances, such as the fifth generation (5G) mobile broadband, will only widen this existing disparity. Therefore, we need a broadband plan to establish goals that guide the development and investment of broadband infrastructure for public interest across the state. Forty-four states and Puerto Rico have enacted such plans² and certain

¹ Connected Nation Texas Analysis of Unserved Rural Household Data, Connected Nation Texas Planning and Access, July 2020; https://connectednation.org/texas/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/08/TX_Broadband_Availability_SpeedTier_Rural_2020_07_31_v2.pdf

² National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Internal Compilation, June 2020

federal funding programs award priority points for a state broadband plan when considering applications³. Funding applications submitted by Texas broadband providers start out at a point deficit in competitive processes because we do not have a state broadband plan. Texas is leaving federal funds on the table that could help bridge the digital divide in our state.

Texas is well overdue for a state broadband plan, and we believe the state needs to begin the process of creating one immediately. Texas cannot afford to wait until the 2021 Legislative Session to begin this process. Other states are well ahead and are effectively leveraging private investments and federal funding for advancing broadband in their communities. Acting now also provides Texas some runway for any legislative actions that may need to be enacted during the upcoming Legislative Session, while waiting until the 2021 Session to start a plan would potentially push necessary legislative action off until 2023.

When developing the Texas Broadband Plan, there are various examples available from other states to guide content, and the following key elements are common within robust state plans:

- Establishment of clear goals and objectives the state seeks to achieve in a given timeline for broadband connectivity that provide a baseline against which to measure progress;
- Identification of potential policy barriers;
- Creation of regional approaches that incorporate unique challenges across the state with broadband deployment that support existing regional planning entities;
- Encouragement of collaborations and partnerships across various entities, such as economic development, education, public safety, health care, and agriculture to help achieve established goals;
- Evaluation of existing assets and community anchor institutions throughout the state that can support broadband deployment; and
- Assessment of the demand and future needs of broadband access across the state.

Furthermore, the influx of federal funding like the Coronavirus Relief Fund, provide exceptional opportunities for financing the development of a state broadband plan. Although U.S. Department of Treasury guidance on the use of Coronavirus Relief Funds for Broadband initiatives is unclear, other states such as South Carolina, have utilized their funds for broadband planning purposes⁴. Texas should consider leveraging this or other funding to jump start the planning process. The state can also seek assistance from philanthropic organizations to support this initiative.

The time is now for Texas to join the other 44 states in planning the development of this critical 21st century infrastructure. A recent study commissioned by Deep East Texas Council of Governments, whose majority population does not have access to reliable broadband, indicates that broadband development within their 12 counties has the potential to add 2,500 jobs and \$300 million in incremental gross

³ United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Reconnect Evaluation Scoring FAQ, February 2020; <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/reconnect-evaluation-scoring-faq.pdf>

⁴ State of Carolina, Office of Regulator Staff, Mapping and Planning, <https://ors.sc.gov/broadband/mapping-and-planning>; South Carolina General Assembly, 123rd Session, House Bill 5202, June 2020; https://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess123_2019-2020/bills/5202.htm


domestic product over 10 years via investments in IT, education, and telehealth alone⁵. Similar economic benefits can be realized in other regions throughout rural Texas and the state can assist by prioritizing broadband development in these areas through planning.

Thank you again for your work on keeping Texans safe and stabilizing our economy during this difficult time. We appreciate your consideration.

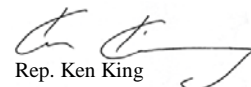
Respectfully,


Rep. Trent Ashby

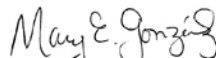

Sen. Robert Nichols


Sen. Dawn Buckingham


Rep. Drew Darby


Rep. Ken King


Sen. Lois Kolmhorst


Rep. Mary González


Rep. Stan Lambert



Sen. Kel Seliger


Rep. Cody Harris


Rep. Brooks Landgraf


Rep. Charles "Doc" Anderson



Rep. Donna Howard


Rep. Christina Morales


Rep. Ernest Bailes IV


Rep. Oscar Longoria


Rep. Chris Paddie



Rep. Travis Clardy


Rep. Eddie Lucio III



Rep. Walter T. "Four" Price


Rep. John Cryer


Rep. Kyle Kacal

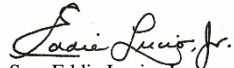

Rep. James Talarico

⁵ Deep East Texas Council of Governments, The Case for Broadband in Deep East Texas, May 2020; https://0d24fbc8-d5de-4683-8267-6b36f8555656.filesusr.com/ugd/a7f184_e621109bfa1142d5989bec16970497d6.pdf

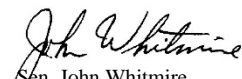

Sen. Peter P. Flores


Sen. Joan Huffman


Sen. Nathan Johnson


Sen. Eddie Lucio, Jr.


Sen. Angela Paxton


Sen. John Whitmire

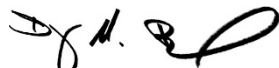

Sen. Judith Zaffirini



Rep. Steve Allison


Rep. Michelle Beckley


Rep. Cecil Bell, Jr.


Rep. Keith Bell


Rep. Diego Bernal


Rep. Kyle Biedermann

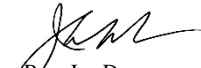

Rep. Cesar Blanco



Rep. DeWayne Burns


Rep. Garnet Coleman



Rep. Nicole Collier


Rep. Tom Craddick

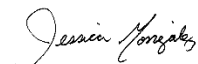

Rep. Jay Dean



Rep. Dan Flynn



Rep. Gary Gates


Rep. Charlie Geren


Rep. Barbara Gervin-Hawkins

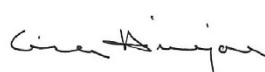

Rep. Jessica Gonzalez

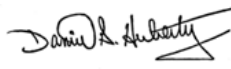

Rep. Vikki Goodwin


Rep. Bobby Guerra



Rep. Sam Harless


Rep. Ana Hernandez


Rep. Gina Hinojosa


Rep. Dan Huberty



Rep. Justin Holland


Rep. Celia Israel


Rep. Julie Johnson


Rep. Phil King


Rep. Tracy King

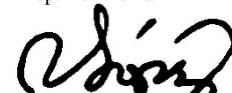

Rep. John Kuempel


Rep. Matt Krause


Rep. Lyle Larson

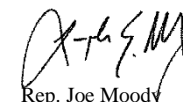

Rep. Jeff Leach

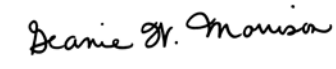

Rep. Ben Leman



Rep. Ray Lopez


Rep. Terry Meza



Rep. Ina Minjarez


Rep. Joe Moody



Rep. Geanie Morrison




Rep. Morgan Meyer




Rep. Andy Murr



Rep. Candy Noble




Rep. Tom Oliverson




Rep. Lina Ortega




Rep. Leo Pacheco



Rep. Jon Rosenthal




Rep. Matt Schaefer




Rep. JD Sheffield




Rep. Carl Sherman



Rep. Hugh Shine



Rep. Reggie Smith



Rep. Lynn Stucky




Rep. Ed Thompson



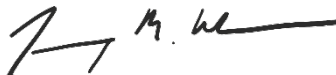
Rep. Steve Toth




Rep. Gary VanDeaver




Rep. James White



Rep. Terry Wilson



Rep. John Wray



Rep. Gene Wu