



Testimony of Consolidated Communications

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology

LD 1894 "An Act To Support Municipal Broadband Infrastructure through Incentives and Competition"

Thursday, February 3, 2022

Good morning, Chairman Lawrence, Chairman Berry, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology. My name is Simon Thorne and I live in Farmington, Maine. I am the Senior Manager of Government Relations for Consolidated Communications. On behalf of Consolidated, I'm here today to offer the following comments in respectful opposition to LD 1894:

Consolidated shares the State's desire to expand broadband to all Maine people in the quickest, most cost-effective ways possible. We are a strong supporter of broadband growth in Maine and we are in the midst of a five-year plan to upgrade fiber to more than 450,000 locations in the State. In addition to this, Consolidated has received funding through the Rural Digital Opportunity fund to upgrade extremely rural and completely unserved locations to fiber over the next 6 years. Consolidated has engaged with the Connect Maine Authority building out 1G symmetrical service to Long Island and Eastbrook and currently has NTIA grants pending for an additional 11,000 locations to be upgraded to fiber to the premise service if those grants are awarded. The pandemic has certainly demonstrated the need for reliable high speed internet and as such the State of Maine will see a dramatic increase in fiber to the home solutions from many providers including Consolidated Communications.

From Consolidated's perspective the bill is a little unclear in its purpose along with its proposed changes to the municipal gigabit fund. It appears the amended bill seeks to earmark funding for only a certain group of recipients, i.e. municipalities that receive federal grants. To the extent that is correct, Consolidated does not support this bill. The State of Maine has earmarked significant capital from both state and federal funds to help expand broadband. Those funds should be awarded in a fair, competitive and transparent manner to the best projects without regard to the entity seeking the funds. It should be the goal of the State to get the most people connected as quickly as possible in order to maximize digital participation and opportunity. At the present time all entities mentioned in the bill are able to apply for Connect Maine grant funds and the Maine Connectivity Authority is likely to provide a similar opportunity. There does not appear to be good reason to earmark certain funds to a particular group.

The Maine Connectivity Authority is in the process of getting their initial operations and programs off the ground. We are excited about the opportunities the MCA will provide to Maine people and we look forward to being a productive partner in its success. The MCA should be allowed time to establish priorities and rules which may include earmarks for matching federal grants, but these programs should be available to any party that may receive federal grants and not just municipalities. This will ensure that the MCA and Maine people are presented with the most competitive, cost-effective options possible.

For this reason, we respectfully offer this testimony against LD 1894. I'm happy to answer questions, now and at the work session.