



PRESS RELEASE

OREGON HOUSE DEMOCRATS

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For More Information, Contact:
Aaron Fiedler: 503-986-1904
aaron.fiedler@oregonlegislature.gov

Oregon House Votes to Support Rural Broadband Development

Establishes Rural Broadband Office, provides funds for internet expansion

SALEM – Broadband internet would get a boost in rural Oregon under legislation that passed the Oregon House of Representatives today.

“Many of us who live on or near the I-5 corridor take our fast internet for granted,” said Rep. Pam Marsh (D-Ashland), the chief proponent of both House Bill 2173 and House Bill 2184. “But that’s not the case for many Oregonians in our rural outback who live and work in internet deserts.”

“Inadequate service is an economic issue, because broadband applications are ubiquitous across business sectors,” Marsh added. “Schools rely on the internet for research, digital content, and testing. Our agricultural sector has increasingly turned to broadband-based strategies to increase yields and spur efficiency. Telehealth holds great promise to address healthcare outcomes and costs.”

House Bill 2173 puts into state law the Oregon Broadband Office which is housed within Business Oregon. The office is tasked with identifying gaps, barriers and solutions to broadband deployment in unserved and underserved areas of the state; assist local communities with planning and technical assistance; pursuing and leveraging private and federal funding; and promoting private sector, public sector and cooperative broadband solutions.

House Bill 2184 modernizes the universal service fund to include cell phones and voice over internet protocol providers, also known as VOIP, in the universal service fund surcharge, which is currently limited to landlines. It also creates a new Broadband Fund to support the work of the Broadband Office. Revenues will be distributed via grants or loans to unserved or underserved areas of the state through plans drafted by the new Broadband Office. Priority will go to school districts and public libraries, and the fund will provide the state match to be used to attract 90 percent federal funding for our Connecting Schools Fund.

“For too many in Oregon, including many within my own rural district, access to high-speed internet is out of reach,” said Rep. David Gomberg (D-Otis). “This lack of access slows the ability of people to start and maintain businesses and is a drag on our rural economies. This legislation is an important step forward to ensure every Oregonian has access to the internet.”

According to the Federal Communications Commission's annual Broadband Deployment Report, many in rural Oregon lack access to high-speed internet. Statewide, 82 percent of Oregonians have access to broadband in their homes. While 85 percent of residents in the Portland metro area have access to broadband internet, just 67 percent of Eastern Oregon residents have the same access.

House Bill 2173 passed 54 to 5 and House Bill 2173 passed 37 to 22. Both now go to the Oregon Senate for consideration.

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