

HB 3213: Broadband – Testimony to Committee

This bill proposes to add 15 words to current statute. Its importance surpasses its simplicity.

Broadband technology is an essential ingredient for all local economies in the state, and indeed, essential for Oregon to stay competitive in the national economy. High speed internet access attracts and grows new businesses, keeps what businesses we do have, and is one of the most powerful tools we have for economic and workforce development.

Just like water, power, and roads were essential infrastructure in the last century, internet access is the essential infrastructure of the 21st century. The internet transports data like highways and rails transport goods. It shapes our businesses and their opportunities for competition and growth.

The delivery of internet access for business purposes and economic development is a key factor for determining where to locate. They need access to roads, airports, water, sewer, and power. They need high speed internet access as well.

The Broadband Advisory Council is doing a great job with its mission and what the Legislature has asked them to do in statute: to report to us on affordability and accessibility, and specifically on the use of broadband in telehealth, energy management, education, and government.

But I think we're missing the boat. We should be paying much more attention to the role of broadband in economic activity and community development *generally*, and we can start by updating our direction to the Council.

At the Oregon Business Plan summit in 2015, we heard community perspectives gathered from the regional economic forums in regions of the state in 2014. More than half of the 11 economic regions listed enhanced broadband distribution as essential for their region, and that the broadband access that they do have needs work. Those regional meetings included South Central in Klamath Falls, Eastern Oregon in Ontario, Mid-Willamette Valley in Monmouth, South Willamette Valley in Eugene, North Coast in Astoria, and North Central in The Dalles. All of those regions are saying that we need to focus on broadband.

Oregon has more than 3,400 tech industry firms, including software firms, video game developers, and biotech companies. And just about every business in Oregon depends on broadband now, whether they're communicating with customers 20 miles or 2,000 miles away, or exchanging engineering designs, big data, or agricultural pest control best practices. Tech companies employ 78,300 people statewide, and the industry has grown by more than 10% a year for the past 5 years. This is serious business and serious economic activity. Oregon tech companies compete with the Bay Area and Seattle for talent and business, and they rely on high speed internet access to stay competitive.

Our Solution

To keep our local, regional, and state economies competitive, we should pay more attention to broadband and its role in our economic future.

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This bill makes a simple proposal: it amends the Broadband Advisory Council's current reporting duties by directing it to report *also* on the role of broadband technology in economic development and its role in local, state, and regional economies.

Let's pay more attention to broadband, it is vital to our economic future. I hope that improving this component of our infrastructure becomes a priority focus for all the regions throughout the state.