

High speed internet access: Essential infrastructure for the 21st century

(Testimony for SB 140: Broadband Advisory Council)

I support continuing the Broadband Advisory Council. I'm speaking today to emphasize how important high speed internet access is to the state's economy. Not just attracting or growing new business, but even keeping what we have. Just like water, power, and roads were essential infrastructure in the last century, internet access is *our* essential infrastructure for the 21st century.ⁱ

Over the internet we move data, just as we move physical objects over land, air, and water. The internet is transportation of data like highways and rail transport goods. We have lots of policy planning and funding that address last century's infrastructure, transportation, water, sewer and power. Little is said in our policies about 21st century infrastructure for internet access. We need to change that.

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. Not a mention of economic activity or community development. I think we're missing the boat – we need to pay much more attention, and we should start by reviewing our direction to the council, our support for their work, and our infrastructure investment plans.

At the Oregon Business Plan summit earlier this year, we heard community perspectives gathered from the regional economic forums in all the regions of the state in 2014. Out of 11 of the economic regions, more than half of them listed enhanced broadband distribution as essential for their region, and that 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 Broadband is something we need to focus on, we need more of it.

The Eugene/Springfield area has 200 professional game developers. So you think, well isn't that interesting. A fun little fact. But this is serious business, and serious economic activity. Per capita, this is one of the largest concentrations of game developers in the entire US. As one local businessperson describes it, the game industry is larger than Hollywood, and it's still growing because it's easier and can locate anywhere. Oregon competes with The Bay Area and Seattle. He says, "we have to remain competitive in other areas, like having fiber." 99% of the money coming to his business is from out of state, and much of it is from outside the US. That's our export economy.

The point is: without fiber optic and without broadband access, Oregon's economy will suffer. Not just software developers, the wide-ranging business community depends on technology. Broadband should be defined as essential infrastructure. Let's support the Broadband Advisory Council, and let's pay more attention to broadband: The internet is a highway for our economic future.

ⁱ We should recognize it in relevant statutes, and include it in legislative direction to agencies, boards and commissions where appropriate.