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Senate Democrats Pass Legislation to Improve Connectivity for Rural Oregon

SALEM – Today, Senate Bill 1603 – the Rural Telecommunications Investment Act – passed the Senate on a 16-4 vote. Senate Bill 1603 will help Oregon make progress in eliminating “internet deserts” by modernizing the ways in which the state invests in telecommunications across Oregon.

Funds to support rural telecommunications services are supported by telephone landline users, and currently fewer and fewer Oregonians choose to maintain landlines. By broadening the fund to include cell phone and voice over internet protocol providers, Oregon can expand access to cell and broadband services where service gaps exist.

“The digital divide across Oregon has become a critical concern during the COVID-19 crisis,” said Senator Arnie Roblan (D-Coos Bay). “Rural Oregonians have struggled to access remote work, online learning, telehealth, digital services like delivery of groceries and household items as well as access to personal support systems through phone and video connections.”

Senate Bill 1603 has been crafted to ensure unserved and underserved areas of Oregon as well as vital community resources, like libraries and schools, are prioritized for broadband access.

“The need and desire to invest in broadband infrastructure has been around for some time, but the cost to invest and maintain broadband access has been a barrier,” added Senator Roblan. “This bill will ensure those investments can be made and sustained. It will lessen the digital divide which will improve rural Oregon’s economy, ensure better outcomes for youth, bring community and care to those who are in isolation and those who need to access healthcare. I’m proud of what we’re doing for rural Oregon today.”

Senate Bill 1603 now goes to the House of Representatives for consideration.

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