

Testimony of Governor Janet Mills in Support of LD 1484 "An Act To Enhance the
ConnectMaine Authority's Capacity To Provide World-class Internet"

April 27, 2021

It seems like everyone has a story about slow or no internet access in Maine: a father of four in Owl's Head who has to bring his daughters to a restaurant to connect to WiFi in order to get their homework done. A Blue Hill doctor struggling to view his patients' charts during remote telehealth sessions. A high school student in Hope, Maine, who missed sixteen days of school because of dropped connections.

High speed internet is as fundamental as electricity, heat, and water. It is the primary way of connecting with other people. It is the modern equivalent of rural electrification in the 1930's and the interstate highway system in the 1950's. The internet is our highway of the future, yet thousands of people and businesses still can't access, or afford, high speed internet in Maine.

ConnectME, our state high-speed internet authority, has established the minimum standard for service at 25Mbps (megabits per second) "down" (receiving data) and 3 Mbps "up" (sending data). At least 85,000 locations in Maine do not meet that minimum standard.

That is unacceptable. We need to have high speed internet throughout our state, and with willpower we will get there.

To expand high speed internet, we need to address the three major barriers:

1. A lack of physical infrastructure, especially in rural communities. The low population density of rural Maine has made it unprofitable for the private sector to expand their networks independently;
2. A lack of digital literacy so people will understand and utilize emerging technology and;
3. A lack of affordability. According to Pew Charitable Trusts, 4 in 10 adults with incomes below \$30,000 do not have broadband access. That leaves many households dependent on free wifi hotspots at schools, libraries, and places of business.

Last year, my Administration asked for \$15 million in bond money to expand broadband — the first new investment in internet in more than a decade — and Maine voters approved.

Last year, my Administration also dedicated \$5.6 million in federal CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds in partnership with private internet providers to provide permanent internet infrastructure to more than 730 students across rural Maine.

We also secured mobile hotspots and learning devices for nearly 24,000 students across Maine.

The amendment to LD 1484 we are introducing today will establish the Maine Connectivity Authority to put Maine in the driver's seat when it comes to expanding affordable broadband.

The Authority would spearhead the use of as much as \$129 million for broadband through the American Rescue Act Plan signed into law by President Biden. In a new approach, this Authority will partner with the private sector and communities to leverage private and local investment and

coordinate buildout of infrastructure, as well as own physical broadband infrastructure, hold equity in broadband projects and provide grants and loans. ConnectMaine will continue its important work as a division of this new Authority.

The Authority will address not only our serious infrastructure needs but long term affordability for Maine consumers as well.

The result will be an entity that is well positioned to work with private broadband providers and communities to close the digital divide and drive a more proactive approach to meeting Maine's current and future needs, rather than reacting in a piecemeal fashion to construct a patchwork of infrastructure.

This legislation is for every child who could not learn remotely this year because they could not Zoom into the classroom; for every entrepreneur who could not open the door of their new business because they could not get online; for the father or mother who wanted their child to Zoom with their grandparents but could not; for every person who is considering moving to Maine but wondering if they'll be able to work remotely.

I thank Senator Bennett and Representative Berry and Senator Maxmin and Representative Skolfield for crossing the aisle to cosponsor this important legislation.

I respectfully request that you vote a unanimous ought to pass on this groundbreaking bill.