

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Communications & Technology Ranking Member Doris Matsui

Hearing on “Breaking Barriers: Streamlining Permitting to Expedite Broadband Deployment”

April 19, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Latta.

The topic of today’s hearing is an important one. If we’re able to find bipartisan solutions that speed broadband deployment, we can accomplish a goal shared by all members of this Subcommittee – getting connectivity to communities that still lack it.

While I have some concerns about process and representation on the witness panel today, it is my hope that moving forward, we can get back to a more balanced approach that encourages bipartisan collaboration on a consequential issue.

The small towns and hamlets in my district are desperate for modern internet connectivity. The mayors that reach out to me are ready to do whatever it takes to get their residents connected.

This is something I know is not unique to me. Most of us on this Subcommittee hear from our districts about the lack of broadband on a daily basis. These local governments understand the challenges they face better than anyone. They know where broadband is available, where it’s not, and the barriers they face to connectivity. That’s why I believe we must be supporting, not limiting, their efforts.

These communities *WANT* broadband connectivity and with the funding included in the bipartisan infrastructure bill, I think we have a historic opportunity to provide it. The bipartisan I-I-J-A provided \$65 billion to expand access to broadband through new deployment and adoption efforts.

This includes \$42 billion for the BEAD program which will support deployment of new broadband infrastructure projects. BEAD will be successful because it addresses the fundamental impediment to broadband deployment – economics.

In rural areas where populations are more spread out, private companies can’t afford to deploy or operate a network. In those areas, the problem isn’t permitting barriers, it’s an unsustainable business case.

Thankfully, Congress correctly recognized this dynamic with the bipartisan BEAD program. Continuing to support NTIA and the states as they implement BEAD is the single most powerful tool we have to connect our unserved constituents.

Let me repeat, it is the bipartisan BEAD program, more than any bill on today's agenda, that will be responsible for closing the digital divide. In both Republican and Democratic districts this funding will soon result in shovels in the ground and homes coming online. If you haven't already, I'd encourage Members to reach out to their state broadband offices. Let them know about the needs of your district and get engaged.

Over this past recess, I held a roundtable with NTIA, the California Public Utilities Commission, and local officials to discuss BEAD implementation. We outlined the broadband needs of the rural areas in my district and how all levels of government can work together to get them served.

I truly believe that this type of federal, state, and local collaboration is the key to successful broadband deployment. Leveraging the expertise of all involved to connect communities is the right path forward.

That's why I'm concerned that as drafted, some of the proposals on the agenda today could undermine that collaboration. Rigid top-down federal preemption can never be as successful as meaningful incentives to support local collaboration and engagement.

Having said that, it's clear that there are ample opportunities to support a more predictable, sustainable permitting process. Especially at the federal level. Contradictory permitting requirements, unacceptable timelines, and a confusing tangle of bureaucracy at the federal level has inhibited broadband deployment for far too long. This is especially a problem for Western states where federal lands can prevent middle-mile connections that serve as a bridge between communities.

I'm hopeful we can find bipartisan agreement on issues like this which can meaningfully speed up broadband deployment. I'm confident we can, because we've done it before. I think of the bipartisan work on common sense dig-once policies led by Congresswoman Eshoo. Or some of the consensus permitting items advanced by the FCC. So, while I am disappointed by some aspects of this hearing, I'm committed to continuing the discussion.

There's more to be done providing clarity and responsiveness at the federal level – incentives for local engagement – and a more predictable process across the board. I want to thank our witnesses for appearing before us today and I look forward to our discussion. With that, I yield back the balance of my time.