

Investing in Rural Broadband and Closing the Digital Divide: A Roadmap

Senator Angus S. King, Jr.

Access to high-speed internet is a necessity for our rural communities to thrive in the 21st century. As essential infrastructure and the foundation for economic prosperity, broadband provides access to global markets, supports innovation across all sectors of the economy, modernizes health care delivery via the use of telehealth, enables growth in at-home enterprises and startups, allows more seniors to age at home, creates greater online learning options, and provides skills necessary to compete in today's workforce.

Unfortunately, millions of Americans living in rural America continue to lack access to high-quality, reliable broadband, both fixed and mobile. According to a recent 2016 report from the Federal Communications Commission, 39% of rural Americans lack internet access at speeds that meet its current definition of broadband. The challenges of rural broadband today are no different than the challenges of rural electrification that faced America in the 1930s. Closing the rural divide and connecting rural America to high-speed broadband will require hard work, creative solutions, and partnerships across the public and private sector. Together with my bipartisan co-chairs, Senators Capito, Klobuchar, Heitkamp, and Boozman, I formed the Senate Broadband Caucus, a working group of Senators focused on bolstering investments in broadband in our country.

As key to these efforts, I am conducting listening sessions and meetings throughout Maine with individuals, local leaders, organizations, and businesses to gather ideas that I can bring to my colleagues in Washington to improve access to affordable high-speed broadband in rural America. Today, I'm announcing four key steps I believe are necessary to meet these challenges and to close the digital divide:

1. **Modernizing Federal Programs That Support Broadband:**

Building on the successful modernization of programs at the FCC, such as the federal [E-rate program](#), and programs at the USDA, the federal government must ensure broadband resources are modernized and adequate in order to support the connectivity rural America needs to prosper. In doing so, we need to ensure better and more accurate broadband data collection, and coordinate broadband support across federal agencies and in partnership with local, state, and private resources. To that effect, I have [co-sponsored](#) the *Broadband Connections for Rural Opportunity Program Act*, bipartisan legislation that will modernize USDA Rural Utilities Service programs and help rural America access grant and loan funding. Over the next several months, I will work to identify proposals and legislation that will modernize federal broadband resources, enable better data collection and federal agency coordination, and incentivize public-private partnerships that support broadband deployment and the many critical services that depend on next generation broadband.

2. **Broadband: A Priority in Federal Infrastructure Investment:**

From large companies to small businesses on Main Street, to farms in rural Maine, to rural health and education providers, individuals and families, broadband access is not a luxury. It is a necessity equal to roads, bridges and other critical infrastructure. Access to the internet expands economic and social opportunities for commerce and strengthens our economy and rural communities. Earlier this year, I led an [effort](#) with 47 of my bipartisan colleagues urging the Administration to include broadband in any infrastructure package. I will continue to work with my colleagues to make sure support for broadband deployment is part of any major investment in our nation's infrastructure.

3. Removing Obstacles and Reducing Costs to Broadband Deployment:

In order to help lower the cost of deployment of advanced broadband networks in rural America, the federal government needs to remove obstacles for states and local communities that want to streamline broadband deployment regulations, including pole attachment and wireless siting rules. The federal government should foster a cost and time efficient regulatory environment that helps spur broadband deployment and incentivizes increased private investment in broadband networks. In the months ahead, I will work to identify strategies and legislation that will help the federal government remove these barriers, encourage states to adopt model pole attachment policies, and improve deployment in rural America.

4. Improving Digital Equity and Closing the Rural Divide:

Broadband, both fixed and wireless, needs to be accessible and affordable to all Mainers regardless of where they live, study or work. Given that one-third of low-income householders with school-age children lack adequate high-speed internet, I successfully advanced bipartisan federal legislation through the reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act to support innovative strategies to connect rural students to the internet outside of the classroom. I will continue to work to close the [homework gap](#) and provide rural communities the tools they need to succeed in today's economy. We must ensure that all students, regardless of where they live or their families' income, can stay current with their schoolwork and graduate with digital skills.

I encourage you to send me ideas about how we can improve broadband in Maine. Ensuring Maine and rural America have access to broadband is a key challenge of our generation and it is one we must work together to solve so that we can build a rural economy that is prepared to succeed in the 21st century.

If you have any questions, ideas, or would like to comment on this white paper, please contact Adam Lachman in Senator King's office at adam_lachman@king.senate.gov.