

Fiber: The State of Legislation

The latest round of broadband funding proposals should focus on long-term effects and return on fiber investment with an emphasis on the economy, the environment and subscriber satisfaction.

By Deborah Kish / *Fiber Broadband Association*

The start of 2021 brought exciting new changes for the fiber broadband industry. A new administration, a new Congress, and a \$3 trillion infrastructure package promised to boost the economy and improve the quality of life for the American people. Since the package announcement, several proposals have been introduced that spotlight broadband and affordability, but government support of broadband initiatives has been ongoing for years.

One example of a current program that funds broadband is the USDA's Rural Utilities Service (RUS) ReConnect Program. It provides loans and grants for the costs of construction, improvement, or purchase of facilities and equipment needed to provide broadband services in eligible rural areas.

Another is the Universal Service Fund (USF), which has provided support related to affordability and connectivity to telecommunications and internet access services since 1996. Because the internet was just getting started in 1996, the USF has since expanded its support to include broadband services. For example, the Connect America Fund (CAF), one of the four USF programs, aims to ensure that residents of high-cost areas have access to comparable services at comparable rates to those in urban areas. The E-Rate program, also governed by the USF, provides support for telecommunications services (fixed and mobile), internet access, and the necessary equipment to receive these services in schools and libraries.

The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), the CAF follow-up program, was

proposed to establish \$20.4 billion in funding to bring high-speed fixed broadband service to rural homes and small businesses over 10 years in two phases.

Through the years, government support has had to roll with the changes caused by advancements in technology, growing popularity, use of the internet and applications, mobility and a pandemic. "Critical infrastructure," such as bridges, roads, railways and highways that once served as the primary means for conducting everyday life, has arguably become less important as more people learn, work and are entertained at home.

Broadband now constitutes critical infrastructure, with new proposed acts and plans to support it. Furthermore, the FCC is collecting consumer broadband availability and quality of experience information to update the accuracy of its existing broadband maps. The point of this is to identify the "haves" and "have nots" to justify expanded funding.

MILLIONS, BILLIONS AND TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS

In response largely to the pandemic, several proposed acts and plans have surfaced, including the \$17 billion American Rescue Plan (ARP); the \$94 billion Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act; and, of course, the \$100 billion for broadband in the American Jobs Plan (President Biden's infrastructure plan).

The ARP is the fourth installation, or building block, of the previously enacted \$1.4 trillion COVID-19 relief packages: the

Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act; the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA); and the initial COVID-19 relief critical pandemic stimulus aid set to expire September 2021. The ARP is set in place to reimburse schools and libraries for internet access and connected devices such as modems, routers and Wi-Fi hot spots.

In March, Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-SC) and Senator Amy Klobachar (D-MN) introduced the \$94 billion Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act in the House and Senate, with an \$80 billion allocation for gigabit symmetric broadband deployment. It aims to build high-speed broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved communities to ensure Americans have affordable internet connectivity to learn and work from home, access telehealth services, and stay connected to friends and family.

The American Jobs Plan includes spending \$100 billion over eight years to expand high-speed broadband access to the entire U.S. Interestingly, the plan prioritizes support for broadband networks owned, operated by or affiliated with local governments, nonprofit organizations and cooperatives – providers with less pressure to turn profits and committed to serving entire communities. In addition, funds will be set aside for infrastructure on tribal lands.

President Biden's plan calls for 100 percent "future proof" broadband coverage by the end of the decade and considers high-speed connections "the new electricity," drawing parallels to the Rural Electrification Act legislation that brought power lines to farms and rural communities.

FIBER AS CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

A number of technologies can provide high-speed internet access, but only one can provide the necessary bandwidth to satisfy the growing needs of the average household: fiber optic cable. Why? Currently, the FCC defines "basic" internet downstream and upstream speed as 25/3 Mbps, deeming this "good enough."

Providing high-speed internet to communities via fiber would give people the best possible internet experience and serve as an eco-friendly foundation to build on that will improve the economy and create jobs.

However, this is, in fact, not enough bandwidth, given the growth in bandwidth-hungry applications, such as videoconferencing, media streaming and others now that essentially all facets of everyday life are conducted over the internet. The pandemic accelerated use, leading to internet rationing or limits on the number of simultaneous users in a single household. Fiber goes beyond 25/3 Mbps and can deliver low-latency service at gigabit speeds. In today's world, it's the critical infrastructure that connects people to their jobs, schools and families.

These new legislative proposals for deployment of high-speed broadband bring opportunities to both supply and demand sides but are not limited to internet service providers or telecom service providers. President Biden's infrastructure plan extends opportunities to municipalities and cooperatives that should consider technology choice from a future-ready perspective.

Providing high-speed internet to communities via fiber would give people the best possible internet experience and serve as an eco-friendly foundation to build on that will improve the economy and create jobs. For example, consider EBP's decision to deploy fiber in Hamilton County in Tennessee. A study revealed that the project resulted in 9,516 new jobs and \$2.69 billion in economic impact and served as the foundation for the county's smart grid.

The funding proposals are in early stages, and a lot can change in terms of which entities receive funding, how the money is used, and when projects

will get underway. It's important for suppliers of fiber optic technology to start extending knowledge and expertise to small, local telco and internet service providers, co-ops, municipalities and local governments.

Raising awareness of the benefits of fiber beyond just high-speed internet by showing successful examples of how fiber played a critical role in the betterment of communities will go a long way toward building community and political will. The focus should be not only on the initial cost of implementation but also on the long-term effects and return on investment with an emphasis on the economy, the environment and subscriber satisfaction. ❖

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