

**Statement on the American Broadband Buildout Act**  
**Senator Susan M. Collins**  
**June 27, 2019**

Mr. President, I rise today to introduce the *American Broadband Buildout Act of 2019*, or “ABBA.” This legislation would help ensure that rural Americans have access to broadband services at speeds they need to fully participate in the benefits of our modern society and economy, regardless of whether they live in our largest cities or our smallest towns. I am delighted to be joined by my friend and colleague, Senator Doug Jones, in introducing this bill.

Mr. President, twenty-five years ago – when the Internet was known as the “World Wide Web” – Americans typically accessed the Web using their home phone lines via modems capable of downloading data at just 56 Kilobits per second – too slow even to support MP3-quality streaming music.

Today, the threshold for broadband service as defined by the FCC allows downloads at speeds nearly 500 times faster – 25 megabits per second. At these speeds, Americans not only can watch their favorite movies on demand in the comfort of their very own living rooms, but also participate in the global economy while working from home, upgrade their skills through online education, stay connected to their families as they age in place, and access health care through advances in telemedicine.

While the increase in broadband speeds has been dramatic and is encouraging, these numbers mask a disparity between urban and rural Americans – nearly all Americans living in urban areas have access to the Internet at speeds that meet the FCC’s broadband threshold, while one-in-four rural Americans do not.

Similar disparities occur in terms of broadband “adoption” – the rate at which Americans subscribe to broadband service if they have access to it. According to a Pew Research Center survey last year, 22 percent of rural Americans don’t use the Internet at home, compared to just eight percent of urban Americans.

The bipartisan bill that we are introducing would help close the “digital divide” between urban and rural America by directing the FCC to provide up to \$5 billion in matching grants to assist states and state-approved entities in building “last-mile” infrastructure to bring high-speed broadband directly to homes and businesses in areas that lack it.

Here are a few key points about the bill I would like to highlight:

First, projects that receive funding must be located in “unserved” areas, where broadband is unavailable at speeds that meet the FCC’s standard. Narrowing the focus to those areas will ensure that the money goes where it’s needed most, and will protect against “over-building” where broadband infrastructure is already in place.

Second, and this is important, the bill requires that this federal funding be matched through public-private partnerships between the broadband service provider and the state in

which the last-mile infrastructure project will be built. This means that states and their private sector partners will have “skin in the game” to balance the federal commitment, ensuring that projects will be well thought-out and designed to be sustainable.

Third, the bill requires that projects be designed to be “future proof,” meaning that the infrastructure installed must be capable of delivering higher-speeds as broadband accelerates in the future. This will ensure that federal tax dollars are used to help build a network that serves rural Americans now and in the future, without having to rebuild it every time technology advances.

Furthermore, the bill directs the FCC to prioritize the funding of projects in states that have traditionally lagged behind the national average in terms of broadband subscribers and are at risk of falling further behind as broadband speeds increase.

Finally, the bill provides for grants for digital literacy and public awareness campaigns highlighting the benefits and possibilities of broadband service, and helping to attract employers to rural parts of our country where broadband services are lacking and yet essential for a businesses’ success. The key reason to do this is to address the disparity in adoption rates I have already mentioned, which will help drive down the cost of the service and make it more affordable for everyone.

One broadband application that holds special promise for rural America is telemedicine. As a native of Aroostook County – the largest county by land area east of the Mississippi, with fewer than 70,000 inhabitants – I know how important health care is to the vitality, and even the survival, of rural communities. Often, these communities struggle to attract and retain the physicians that they need to ensure access to quality care. Broadband can help bridge the gap by enabling innovative health care delivery in these rural communities.

In an example described to me in a recent letter, hospice workers at Northern Light Homecare were able to use the Internet and video technology to help support a patient living on an island off the coast of Maine – not far as the seagull flies, but hours away in travel time. Although the connection was very poor, the video enabled the hospice nurses to monitor the patient’s symptoms and provide emotional support to her family. As the author of that letter, Lisa Harvey-McPherson, put it: “Our hospice team could be doing so much more with video and tele-monitoring technologies if Maine had better connectivity.”

Mr. President, I ask that this letter from Lisa Harvey-McPherson be entered into the Record immediately following my remarks.

Mr. President, in closing, rural Americans deserve to enjoy the benefits of high-speed Internet in the same way that urban Americans do. But a “digital divide” has arisen due to the simple fact that rural areas are more sparsely populated than urban ones and are therefore more expensive to serve. The bill Senator Jones and I are introducing today would help to bridge this digital divide by funding “future proof” broadband where it is needed most, and giving a real boost to job creation in rural America. I urge our colleagues to support our bill.

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