

STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND
TRANSPORTATION FIELD HEARING ON
“THE STATE OF BROADBAND IN ARKANSAS”
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Good morning and thank you Senator Pryor for inviting me to be here with you and so many good Arkansans this morning. I'm happy to be here for many reasons. First, I worked in the U.S. Senate for many years and getting to spend some quality time with our Senate leaders is always exciting for me—especially when it's someone who epitomizes the best of the Senate—mastering the issues, knowing how to work across the aisle to get things done, and having an expansive vision for this great country of ours. Like your father before you, you add luster to the Senate. I'm also glad to be here because of the proximity of the Presidential Library. I had the honor of serving President Bill Clinton as Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Trade Development and I am so proud of what he accomplished for America both at home and around the world and proud of the opportunity he gave me to serve.

“Don't stop thinking about tomorrow,” Bill Clinton told us. And that's what this hearing is all about—tomorrow. Where are we heading in this still-new Twenty-first century and what role are telecommunications going to play in shaping our future? My answer to that is that the future will belong to those who learn best how to deploy all these new technologies, products and services. My answer is we *have to get this right* for America. And part of my answer, unfortunately, is that right now we're not where we need to be. Oh, I know we all have lots of new gizmos and gadgets and that advanced telecommunications like broadband have brought us some pretty fundamental changes, including right here in Arkansas. But I also know that other countries are eating our lunch in building their communications infrastructures and I believe that America's lack of a concerted national strategy to get back in the lead is tantamount to playing Russian roulette with our future.

Let me begin by saying that my overriding objective since going to the FCC in 2001 has been to bring the best, most accessible and cost-effective communications system in the world to all of our people—and I mean *all* of our people. We can't leave anybody behind in this great new age of high-speed communications. That means those who live in rural America, those who live in the inner city and those who live on tribal lands; it means not just the affluent and privileged, but those who are economically disadvantaged and those with disabilities. Each and every citizen of this great country should have access to the wonders of communications. I'm not talking about doing all these people some kind of feel-good, do-gooder favor by including them; I'm talking about doing America a favor. I'm talking about making certain our citizens can compete here at home and around the world with those who are already using broadband in all aspects of their lives.

The way I see it, broadband is really the great infrastructure challenge of our

time. If you course back through the annals of America's past, you will find that just about every major era confronted a stark infrastructure challenge. In the early days, as we settled new lands, the need was to get the produce and products of our settlers to market—so we built roads and turnpikes and ports and canals to get the job done. Then, as we became a continental, industrial power, we needed railroads to bring the nation together, so we laid a railway grid across the country, climaxed by the great saga of the transcontinental railroads. Closer to our own era, in the Eisenhower years, came the Interstate Highway System, to bind city and state and nation. Even in telecom, we found ways to get telephone service out to most of our citizens. And here's my point: in all of these great infrastructure build-outs, there has always been a critical role for business, local community organizations and government to work together toward a great national objective. We didn't just throw up our hands and say "Leave it to somebody else," or "the market will automatically get it all done." No, these things were the business of the people. That's how we looked at these challenges. That's how we overcame them. That, my friends, is precisely how we built this great country of ours. We pulled together and worked together. You know, we all rightly value that great Declaration of Independence and that glorious fight for freedom, but in reality it was millions of Americans making a declaration of interdependence, one upon the other, that won us our freedom and allowed us to build the greatest nation in history.

To me—and I believe this deeply—the broadband networks are the roads and canals and railways and highways of the Information Age. Our future will be decidedly affected by how we master, or fail to master, advanced communications networks and how quickly and how well we build out high-speed communications connectivity. If we succeed, we will create millions upon millions of new educational and economic opportunities. We will see new local businesses—and local governments, too—providing tremendous value-added services everywhere in the country. We will advance medical care through the development and delivery of new health services. We will ensure that schools and libraries are huge digital resources for their communities. We will give that aspiring small business person in any number of rural Arkansas communities a level field on which to compete with folks in the city and competitors around the globe.

Those who get access to high-speed broadband will win. Those who don't will lose. It's as simple as that. I want to help make sure we all get there, and that America's rural communities get there as soon as everyone else. I'll tell you this with confidence: if high-speed broadband is permitted to be primarily an urban phenomenon, the digital gap in this country that already separates urban and rural America will grow still wider and rural America will be relatively worse off in the Twenty-first century of modern communications than it was in the days of plain old telephone service in the last century. We can't let that happen. This competitive world of ours is not going to make time for rural America to catch up. That may sound harsh, but it's also true.

The important question, of course, is what can we do about all this? Now I don't happen to think there is a one-size-fits-all broadband solution for this country. The Ozarks in northern Arkansas will likely require a different tact than the flat expanses of

the Delta along the eastern border. And surely whatever plans we have for dense urban centers like Austin or Denver are not going to be the ticket for success in our rural communities. There are great differences—in population, culture and topography across this vast land of ours. So we need to embrace all kinds of solutions if we have any chance of succeeding.

I think that means we need a Universal Service Fund that has broadband as its core mission. It means encouraging communities to develop innovative solutions to getting broadband out. It means having a Federal Communications Commission that provides the hard data we all need to understand exactly where we are—basic things like who actually has broadband, what it is costing, and how fast it is. It means having an FCC that is committed to deploying its expertise and assistance much more proactively than has been the case in recent years. It means government coming up with solutions that might include tax incentives, more Rural Utilities Service loans, public-private partnerships, and encouraging some old fashioned competition. And it means having government at all levels implementing a creative, comprehensive and well-funded strategy.

I look forward to getting your thoughts today. I want to understand better where you are and where you think we should be heading. So thank you all for coming here today—providers, local officials, educators, entrepreneurs, technologists, consumers and citizens who understand the real challenges and promise in your home state. I have no doubt that what I hear today will help shape my views as I work back in Washington to craft policies that can bring broadband to all Americans. And I am optimistic that everyone here, pulling and hauling together, can make sure that in the broadband revolution of our time no community—and no Arkansan—is left behind.