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COMMITTEE ON
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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–2507

August 1, 2014

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The Honorable Tom Wheeler
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, Southwest
Washington, DC 20536

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

Broadband internet access has become an essential for growth in many rural communities, enhancing education and opening pathways to economic opportunities. Small towns and communities can rely on its residents' talent and determination when competing in a global market. The availability of robust broadband service in such towns and communities will ensure that they are not left behind in today's technology-centric economy.

Phase II of the Connect America Fund, or CAF II, offers an excellent opportunity to bring high-speed fiber-optic broadband connections to millions of Americans who wouldn't otherwise have broadband and the opportunities it brings. Thanks to the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) efforts, thousands of rural communities are now counting on CAF II. Since CAF II represents the final phase of Universal Service reform for these areas, its rules will effectively determine whether millions of rural residents will have broadband access. The June 10 Further Notice of Proposed Rule Making (FNPRM) has raised hopes further by more than doubling the promised download speeds from 4 MBPS to 10 MBPS.

I am writing today to emphasize how important it is to ensure that the final details of CAF II live up to its promise. I am concerned that if the FCC more than doubles the speed requirements without allowing the appropriate level of flexibility in other elements of CAF II, the program's overall mission could be endangered.

To the FCC's credit, the June 10 FNPRM identifies a number of constructive ideas which could help achieve the faster network goals without exceeding CAF II's annual budget. First, the CAF II funding period must be extended from the current 5 years to 10 years so there is adequate time for the construction of the higher-capacity network. Next, the FCC must use the same 10 Mbps standard when identifying broadband availability from competitors, otherwise communities with just 4 Mbps will be left behind. The FCC must also establish network build-out parameters consistent with the goal of providing quality broadband service to as many people as possible within CAF's limited funding framework. To that end, providers must be given the flexibility to substitute extremely high cost locations with un-served locations in partially served census blocks.

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I also encourage you to be as precise as possible when targeting support to areas where broadband would not otherwise be available. In the "interim" CAF I phases, an entire census block could be disqualified if a competitive carrier claimed to serve even a small fraction of its customers, and many areas were disqualified based on the untested assertions of wireless Internet Service Providers with line-of-sight and capacity issues which made them a poor substitute for fiber-fed networks. Now that we are in the final phase, I hope the CAF II standards can reach those unserved customers and also require competitive carriers to meet a reasonable standard of verification before depriving a community of CAF II support.

Despite years of federal efforts to overcome the digital divide, I often hear from constituents who want and need assistance in order to bring broadband service to their homes. The concerns they raise are a reminder of how challenging rural broadband policy can be, but also how important it is. Thank you very much in advance for considering my concerns and I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Billy Long
Member of Congress