

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
2019 ANNUAL PREMIER MEMBERSHIP & STRATEGIC MEETING
FIBER BROADBAND ASSOCIATION
WASHINGTON, DC
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Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for that kind introduction, Lisa, and for inviting me to join you all here today for the annual premier membership meeting of the Fiber Broadband Association. As an FCC Commissioner, the ethics office doesn't allow me to be a "premier member" of much these days, so it is nice to be here in such rarified air.

I'm Geoffrey Starks and I'm just finishing up my first year as a Commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission. I am pleased to be closing out this year with the folks in this room who are among those on the front lines of spreading the critically important scalable infrastructure that is futureproof fiber across this country. "Built once and built right" – as it says in FBA's mission statement. Amen to that.

The first fiber-optic network in this country was lit up in the late 1970s. The first homes were wired in the late 1980s. As I was preparing to speak to you all today, I came across a New York Times dispatch from 1989, nearly thirty years ago to the day, describing the "experiment" of installing fiber-optic cable to 600 homes in an "affluent suburb" of Los Angeles. As the article noted, a fiber future was expected to enable the "delivery of entire newspapers electronically" or a "new generation of smart home appliances that will combine the functions of televisions, computers, facsimile machines and telephones." The article went on: "Visionaries foresee such things as home banking, electronic mail, picture telephones and customized television feeds becoming standard home fare." Those predictions seem quaint now.

However, this three-decade-old article written at the dawn of our fiber future also raised the alarm. Would these networks only be deployed to those that could afford them, "creating an information technology elite and erecting a new, electronic wall between rich and poor[?]" Would "advanced communication and data services [] be offered to telecommunications 'affluentials' while maintaining only a minimal 'telephone safety net' for low-income consumers[?]" Would these new networks ever reach rural areas, or would "older telecommunications networks in small towns [] become the equivalent of the Route 66 of the 21st century, with the same failing motels and roadside businesses[?]"

Then-Senator Al Gore said, "There is not going to be a Government program that will bring fiber to the home. It just costs too much money." (I've got some news to break to you, Mr. Vice President). Gene Kimmelman, then at the Consumer Federation of American said, "Certain segments of the market will be underserved unless the Government steps in." And then-Congressman Ed Markey said, "The underlying principle of universal service has been part of the communications act since 1934 . . . We need to work on these issues in such a way that access is determined by technology and not economics." Sound familiar?

In the spirit of the season, and with that backdrop front of mind, I'm going to take this opportunity to reflect on the year past and look ahead – particularly when it comes to making sure that everyone in this country can partake in our connected present and future. After all, I

said upon being sworn in that I would spend much of this year listening and learning. The opportunities to accomplish those tasks in this job have far exceeded my expectations.

Internet Inequality

At the start of the year, in my very first speech as an FCC Commissioner, I started using the phrase “internet inequality” to highlight the stubborn persistence of the digital divide. We’ve been cognizant of the so-called digital divide for decades. In my mind, when there is a problem that has vexed us for so long, it runs the risk of calcifying into something else entirely. This is particularly troubling to me because internet inequality, at its core, is about real people and their individual dignity, the health of their communities, and our wellbeing as a country. I spent much of this past year learning about what it really means for folks who are impacted by internet inequality.

Our communications infrastructure is the essential conduit that supports everything that happens in this country on any given day – education, healthcare, employment, entrepreneurship, civic participation, and countless other national priorities. High speed broadband has become as necessary for participating in our economy, society, and democracy as electricity or roads. And while that is fantastic news for many, it only threatens to widen the gap that exists between those who have access and those that do not. I’ve seen that when constituents or communities experience internet inequality, they are disconnected from friends, family, businesses, government, and most of modern life.

Conversely, this year I’ve seen that when communities have access to affordable, high-quality broadband infrastructure and devices, students are able to complete assignments and learn the skills they need to participate in digital society, healthcare outcomes improve, and economic growth follows. High speed connections in rural communities enable residents to use telehealth services without having to take time off work and travel for hours to see a doctor or receive care. Broadband infrastructure also enables people to create small businesses and enables farmers to use precision agriculture technology to stay competitive, meet increasing demands, and get their crops from the farm to the city.

We say we “light up” fiber when we flip the switch and turn the network on. I know we are referring to those pulses of light in the glass strands that make the network go. But, in my travels this year, I have seen firsthand the human side of this term – a perspective filled with emotion – like that moment when you plug in those holiday lights for the first time and gaze with wonder upon the display – but on a much grander scale.

Perhaps nowhere was this more striking than during my trip to Tribal communities in New Mexico – some of the most disconnected and isolated places anywhere. In the Pueblo of Santo Domingo, in the small, yet powerful, community library, I heard from librarian Cynthia Aguilar about the day fiber reached her building. As she spoke to us in a soft yet firm voice that would be familiar to any of us who’ve ever gotten a little too rowdy in a library, she lit up, truly, as she recounted the day that the fiber was lit up. With her voice cracking slightly, she compared that day to the day that the railroad came to the Pueblo a century earlier. I heard a similar sentiment from an installation crew with Mescalero Apache Telecom as they taught me how to splice fiber and described what it meant when they connected that strand, for the first time, to a family’s home. And I heard the same refrain from coast to coast, in rural and urban areas, from everyone from business owners to those experiencing homelessness – we are far past the time

when it is possible to go without a high-quality broadband connection. Connectivity is a necessity.

As you all know far too well, there are real people at the other end of the fiber-optic cable you all are laying down or stringing up and, far too often, there are real people and communities just beyond its reach. It is up to all of us to make sure that everyone in this country can take advantage of the next generation of futureproof communications networks.

Observations on Commission Data and Programs

While my travels across the country this past year have fortified my resolve to address internet inequality once and for all, we have work to do back at the FCC.

For instance, it is beyond problematic to me to look back and see that the FCC has spent much of the year getting hammered by everyone and anyone that is paying attention for the unacceptably poor quality of FCC broadband deployment data and coverage maps. In March, the Commission discovered that its latest broadband deployment report overstated broadband connections by 62 million due to bad data submitted by a provider in our Form 477 data collection. Throughout the year, Commission staff was investigating claims of overstated coverage maps submitted during our one-time Mobility Fund II data collection – a data set that was created to avoid issues with our Form 477 data. Days ago, the Commission was forced to scrap the entire \$4.5 billion program because the data was so inaccurate. We have billions of dollars at our disposal to address internet inequality – but if we don't know who in this country has broadband and who does not, there is no guarantee any of this money will help.

And our need for accurate broadband data has not diminished in the past year – if anything it has grown. Over the course of the year, the Commission has announced a number of new or repackaged programs that will require good data to administer. These programs include the \$100 million Connected Care Pilot, the \$20.4 billion Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, the \$950 million Uniendo a Puerto Rico and Connect USVI Funds, and, just recently, the \$9 billion 5G Fund. And, when I appeared before Congress last week, there was talk of using proceeds from our upcoming C-Band auction to fund rural broadband or homework gap programs – which will potentially put billions more dollars at our disposal to connect the disconnected. I think that is a great idea and I am fully supportive of getting as many dollars as it takes to the areas that need it the most. But, as a native Kansan, I was always told it's best to “measure twice, cut once.” The Commission has already proposed sending some of this money out the door based on data that we know is flawed or incomplete. Specifically, we intend to disburse more than three quarters of the RDOF money based on Form 477 data. That worries me.

And, finally, I've noticed in the past year that, as we've rolled out some of these new or revised programs, we've not taken care to ensure the success of the important programs we have been running for many years. For instance, I've been opposed to this administration's attacks on the Lifeline program – the only program we've got that addresses affordability for low-income consumers – and I am concerned by the precipitous drop we've seen in Lifeline subscribers during the past few years. I've been befuddled by proposals to cap our Universal Service Fund programs without even claiming to have an idea of how much money we actually need to finish the job.

Working Together to Make FCC Broadband Support More Effective

So, what have I learned this year? And what will I be working on next year? All of these experiences have inspired my four-point plan to make FCC support for expanding rural broadband more effective: 1) funding rural broadband with accurate and actionable maps and data; 2) advancing more affordable internet connections; 3) incentivizing futureproof connections; and 4) investing in responsible auction winners. And I can tell you right now: I'm going to need the help of the folks in this room to execute this plan as effectively and efficiently as possible.

First, we can no longer have good money chasing after bad data. We need to make sure that our precious universal service dollars make it to the communities and people that need them the most. So, what does that mean for folks in this room? Well, I think the writing has been on the wall for some time now, so it should come as no surprise that I think that the Commission is going to have to become stricter and more proactive when it comes to collecting deployment data. In the past, I've discussed the need for the Commission to collect actual and not prospective or projected deployment data, and to collect more granular deployment data – down to the address level. I've also shared my desire for the Commission to adopt better data quality practices, to include using algorithms and machine learning to scrub the data that we receive and check it for any irregularities.

In the Staff Report on Mobility Fund II, Commission staff agreed with many of my proposals and recommended that the Commission enhance its capacity to “audit, verify, and investigate” the accuracy of data that is submitted to us. Moreover, staff concluded that we need to become more prescriptive with our standards and parameters and seek more granular data representing actual coverage. In my mind, this is critical and I'm glad staff agrees. I applaud the folks in the room who have already given thought to how the Commission can work with you to improve the deployment data it collects, and I encourage you to let me know of any other ideas you may have.

Second, affordability. Our controlling statute is explicit: “Quality services should be available at just, reasonable, and affordable rates.” If we use our finite funds to build out broadband infrastructure without any regard given to whether people can afford the service once it arrives, we have not done the job assigned us by Congress. The average family spends \$2,700 per year on their internet, phone, and cable service. For many working families dealing with increasing expenses and nearly flat incomes, that's just too much.

Last week, before Congress, I proposed that we require rural broadband auction winners to offer an affordable broadband service option. We know that several providers already offer low-cost internet service for around \$10 to \$15 per month or less to qualifying families. To start, I am open to us soliciting the expertise of these providers and other stakeholders to glean additional information about what an affordable offering may look like.

Third, incentivizing futureproof connections. I know that everybody in here was waiting for this part because you live this every day. The FCC has had mixed results when it comes to foreseeing the needs of tomorrow. For instance, as recently as five years ago, some communities received Connect America Fund I funding for service that is so slow that these communities are now counted as unserved today! And the Mobility Fund II program that we sent to the dustbin last week was intended to provide support to build out 4G LTE service at a time when we

already knew that the 5G future was before us. On the other hand, our E-Rate program was designed to bring futureproof fiber to anchor institutions across the country and, as a result, ninety-nine percent of America's K-12 public schools have the fiber-optic connections needed to meet future connectivity needs. So, some hits and some misses here. But, when we are talking about being good stewards of these important funds, we need to get our batting average way up.

That's why I've called for the FCC to conduct a data-driven 10-year look-back on how the FCC's High Cost Program has effectively performed in bringing broadband to our unserved areas. I want to be crystal clear, this study is not at all an attempt to undermine this program or change it in some fundamental way. The Commission has a responsibility to ensure that its policies are working, and the USF program is an important example of where we can do better. We must understand how our rural telecom support programs have performed so that we can better tailor the performance of the RDOF for the next 10 years. Sometimes you have to look back to move forward. Where have we succeeded? Where did we miss the mark? Which communities have had their connectivity needs met in the way that we expected? Which haven't, and why? Above all else, we must avoid waking up 10 years from now—having spent another \$20 billion—still failing to understand which communities are served, and which are not.

But, of course, this begs the question: what does futureproof truly mean? To me, it means scalable infrastructure that can be upgraded for significantly less money and effort than is required for the initial build. It means symmetrical connections that enable rich, next generation multipoint communications and interactions. And how do we leverage existing success stories to make this futureproof connectivity truly ubiquitous and limitless and bring it even deeper into communities across the country? Moving forward, I'd welcome the thoughts of folks in this room as to how the FCC best captures these concepts while staying true to its commitments to be technologically neutral.

And, finally, responsibility and accountability. Folks who know my background know that I've been in enforcement for much of my career, both at the Department of Justice and the FCC. As we sit here, unfortunately, more than a dozen CAF-II auction winners have already defaulted on their bids to provide service to rural areas in states like Arkansas, Minnesota, Michigan, Nevada, Nebraska, Colorado, Missouri, Oklahoma, Kansas, Massachusetts, and Virginia. This is unacceptable and helps no one. Before we send additional dollars out the door, we need to be absolutely sure that all carriers who receive funding are seaworthy and capable of meeting our buildout requirements to deliver connectivity to communities that are in need.

So, there it is. Some puts, some calls. Some give and take. As I mentioned at the top, we are all in this together. I value the hard work you do to make sure that the United States remains on the forefront of the technological revolution. I appreciate your perspective and I'm sure that you all appreciate mine as a regulator. The truth is that, for far too long, we've been stuck in a dangerous loop that has brought us ever closer to the irreparable harm of internet inequality. There are parts of that 1989 New York Times article that, unfortunately, could be written word for word today. And there are broadband programs that we are running today that are still targeting the same places that we've targeted before.

So, as I've reflected on the past year, and years past, I hope that you will too. I've learned a lot in my first year on the job. Collectively, we've all learned a lot about what works and what doesn't when it comes to deploying broadband. It is time to put those lessons into action and finish the fight for truly universal service. While we haven't always "built once and

built right” to date, present company excluded, of course, I am glad that folks like you all get around the table with regularity to figure out how to live up to that credo. I’m hoping the FCC can too. My door is always open. I look forward to working with all of you to make sure we are doing everything that we can to ensure that no person or community is left behind. Thank you for having me here today.