

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
RURAL BROADBAND ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA
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Good afternoon. I want to begin by thanking Congressman McEachin and Congresswoman Spanberger for including me in this very important conversation.

I am Geoffrey Starks, and I've been a Commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission for a little over a year. The FCC administers the Universal Service programs that help ensure that the benefits of broadband reach farther into both rural and urban areas through programs like telemedicine—making high quality health care available everywhere; through digital learning—bringing a world of knowledge and opportunity into every classroom; and through libraries—providing resources as digital hubs in communities. At the FCC, my number one priority has been to ensure that all Americans are connected to affordable and reliable broadband. But there is a persistent “digital divide” in this country that we have been talking about for 25 years, and we all need to be invested in bringing broadband to everyone in every corner of America.

As an FCC Commissioner, I've repeatedly stressed the critical importance of reliable, affordable broadband service to communities throughout America, and I've seen firsthand the impact it can have. That's why today I want to talk about how the persistent problem of the digital divide is hardening into a state of “Internet Inequality.”

The Commonwealth of Virginia gets it, starting at the top. Governor Northam has a vision of a Commonwealth in which everyone has the infrastructure necessary to access the internet, as set forth in the “Commonwealth Connect” report, which both lays out the case for investing in universal broadband access in Virginia, and maps out a strategy for getting it done. For example, I read that the Virginia Telecommunications Initiative (VATI) is providing funding to supplement construction costs for extending service to unserved areas through competitive grants, and Virginia's Tobacco Commission broadband programs are directing funding for building broadband infrastructure to attract companies to rural Virginia areas, already granting in excess of \$130 million. The Commonwealth has also benefitted from federal dollars, with a total of more than \$87 million in overall Universal Service support received in 2018. Over \$10.8 million was awarded in Virginia in the last Universal Service Fund auction we conducted in 2018. Using that money, 5 service providers are now working to bring broadband to almost 40,000 high-cost locations.

But we wouldn't be meeting today if the job were finished. We know that millions of Virginians still lack access to high-quality affordable broadband. But, because of flaws in how the FCC collects its broadband data, we don't actually know where they all are. That's a cause for concern, and I am pleased that our friends in Congress sitting here today are also working to require the FCC to secure reliable broadband deployment data. On September 6th of last year, Representative McEachin introduced HR 4227, the Mapping Accuracy Promotes Services (MAPS) Act, which currently has 48 co-sponsors, including Representative Spanberger. The bill would make it unlawful to submit to the FCC broadband internet access service coverage information for the purposes of compiling an inaccurate broadband coverage map. Representative Spanberger also co-sponsored the Broadband Data Improvement Act of 2019,

introduced in June of last year, that would improve broadband data collection, mapping, and validation by requiring providers to submit, at least biannually, geographically accurate and granular broadband availability data to the FCC. Thank you both for your efforts to improve the FCC's broadband mapping efforts.

Over the last number of months, I have laid out a four-part plan for a data-driven and fiscally responsible approach to promoting rural broadband deployment. The FCC should: (1) provide funding based on accurate data and maps, (2) promote affordable broadband options, (3) incentivize providers to offer future-proof broadband, and (4) hold auction winners accountable.

I've stated many times that our broadband mapping data do not reflect reality on the ground in Virginia and in many other states. At last month's Open Meeting during the vote on the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), our latest vehicle for distributing universal service funds, I presented maps from the state of Georgia that showed a dramatic, in some cases almost mirror image of areas with broadband coverage according to the FCC and those with actual coverage according to the Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative. According to the Commonwealth Connect report, the FCC's numbers for broadband access in Virginia are suspect as well.

The FCC should not have voted to spend precious universal service funds based on bad data, this time to the tune of \$20 billion dollars—almost 5 times more than we've ever awarded for rural broadband. But bad data was only one of the reasons for my partial dissent on the RDOF Order. We have not done enough to ensure that once broadband is available, families can actually afford it. Nothing in that decision addresses the needs of low-income families by, for example, requiring that companies awarded funding offer lower-cost broadband options.

This most recent effort is also a symptom of a long-term problem: for too long, the FCC has subsidized networks that are obsolete by the time they are built. Less than 10 years ago we subsidized "broadband" service at download speeds of just 4 Mbps. We all know those speeds won't cut it today. Universal Service Fund dollars are too scarce and too badly needed to be spent building networks that will be obsolete before we are able to get everyone connected. The FCC should be working to ensure everyone gets access to high-speed networks that will meet Virginians' needs for years to come.

Lastly, I want to emphasize how important it is for state and federal programs to work together. One reason I criticized RDOF was that it penalizes many states that have made their own investments in rural broadband deployment. The decision explains, in quite confusing language, that some areas that received state funds for broadband deployment may not be eligible for this federal fund. But it doesn't provide clear language about how that will work, leaving programs like Virginia's in the dark about how they will be impacted. That's unfair and unwise.

I'm determined to keep working to bring broadband to rural Virginia and every other community in this Nation, but in a way that is supported by facts and reliable data to ensure that we fully understand which communities remain unserved, and how we can effectively and accurately finish the job.