



Henry McMaster
Governor

SOUTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Robert M. Hitt III
Secretary

October 23, 2019

The Honorable William M. Hixon
Legislative Oversight Committee
South Carolina House of Representatives
Post Office Box 11867
Columbia, SC 29211

Dear Representative Hixon:

Thank you for your recent letter on behalf of the Economic Development, Transportation, and Natural Resources Subcommittee of the House Legislative Oversight Committee. You have asked for a brief summary of recent, current, or upcoming efforts by the South Carolina Department of Commerce to support the expansion of broadband in the state.

Access to reliable broadband internet is a challenge facing rural South Carolina and rural communities throughout the nation. The issue is long-standing and without a clear solution. We as a state must take steps to make internet access available to all South Carolinians if, among other things, we want to attract industry to rural areas and provide comparable opportunities to residents in these areas as are available in other areas of our state.

Your letter references Commerce's participation in the South Carolina Broadband Advisory Committee. Our agency participated several years ago in meetings with this group, which is no longer active. Connected Nation, which formed the committee and organized the meetings, is not currently running a program in South Carolina. At the time, the advisory committee identified barriers to broadband access and potential solutions to make broadband available in unserved and underserved areas of South Carolina, but there was no consensus, among other things, on availability versus affordability.

Affordable and reliable access to technology is a key component of Commerce's current rural strategy. Commerce is developing a competitive grant program that is based on the Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT) Program as reflected in H.3780 and a similar program that has been underway in Minnesota since early 2018. The agency has also hired an experienced former local developer as the Director of Integrated Rural Strategies who has joined Commerce's existing rural strategy team in focusing on access to technology and other challenges facing rural South Carolina.

We anticipate that the proposed grant program will provide funding to expand service in several rural communities and that each project will address access, adoption of technology, and affordability of service. In developing the program and plan of action, we have undertaken the following recent activities:

- Met with several internet providers in our rural areas to seek input.
- Acquired maps of 14 rural South Carolina counties that show internet speeds and availability and service providers within these counties.
- Met with Congressman Jim Clyburn's staff to identify federal resources and programs that are currently available to provide technology to and reduce costs of service for citizens on public assistance. (Clyburn's staff is preparing a summary regarding same.)
- Met with the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce to bring stakeholders together to discuss technology access initiatives currently underway in our state. The October 11, 2019 meeting involved the South Carolina Department of Administration, USDA, the South Carolina Department of Education, and the South Carolina Hospital Association. During the meeting, the Chamber of Commerce identified the need for a broadband task force to keep stakeholders connected. Future discussions may include private service providers, who were not included in the October 11 meeting.

Our activities and efforts are ongoing and we would be delighted to meet with you and subcommittee members to answer questions and/or provide further information.

Sincerely,



Robert M. Hitt III

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