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POSITION STATEMENT

House Bill 0043 – Department of Information Technology – Office of Broadband and Joint Committee on Broadband

Before Economic Matters Committee
January 26, 2021

The Rural Maryland Council **SUPPORTS WITH AMENDMENT** House Bill 0043 – Department of Information Technology – Office of Broadband and Joint Committee on Broadband. The purpose of this bill is to alter the uses of the Rural Broadband Assistance Fund and to establish the Office of Broadband in the Department of Information Technology. The bill provides a framework on the leadership, management, and duties of the Office; a funding source; the creation of a Joint Committee and their role; and reporting requirements.

The Rural Maryland Council greatly appreciates that HB 0043 codifies the great work that the Governor has already done by establishing the Office of Rural Broadband by Executive Order in 2017. Codifying the Office will provide it stability to meet its purpose to ensure that every resident in the State 1) is supported in the adoption of reliable, universal, high-quality broadband internet service at an affordable price; and 2) has the tools necessary to use the internet and take advantage of internet resources.

While the Council supports the bill and the change in name from the Office of Rural Broadband to the Office of Broadband, the following amendments are recommended:

1. Keep the Office of Broadband at the Department of Housing and Community Development because it has access to a local government infrastructure fund called, the Rural Broadband Assistance Fund, that is currently being used to pay for expansion projects.
2. Change the layout of the governing board because we are concerned with the narrowness of its composition.

Broadband is a critical infrastructure for business, education, and agriculture today and access remains a real issue in the state's rural areas as almost 20% of rural residents lack internet access. HB0043 will facilitate the expansion of rural broadband by codifying the Office.

The Council respectfully requests your favorable support with amendment of HB0043.

The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) brings together citizens, community-based organizations, federal, state, county and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to collectively address the needs of Rural Maryland communities. We provide a venue for members of agriculture and natural resource-based industries, health care facilities, educational institutions, economic and community development organizations, for-profit and nonprofit corporations, and government agencies to cross traditional boundaries, share information, and address in a more holistic way the special needs and opportunities in Rural Maryland.

"A Collective Voice for Rural Maryland"