



EASTON UTILITIES

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January 22, 2021

To: Chairman Davis and Members of the House Economic Matters Committee
Subject: HB 97: Department of Housing and Community Development –
Office of Digital Inclusion – Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)
Position: Favorable with Amendments

Dear Chairman Davis and Members of the Committee,

Easton Utilities supports the approval, with amendments, of House Bill 97, Department of Housing and Community Development – Office of Digital Inclusion – Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021). We have worked together with members of the Rural Maryland Council (RMC) to review this bill and support the amendments recommended by RMC in their separate testimony.

Easton Utilities is one of five municipally owned utilities in the State of Maryland, and we are the only municipal utility which provides internet, cable TV, and voice services. There are many residents in Talbot County and throughout the Eastern Shore of Maryland who still do not have access to broadband. It is vital to ensure the funding for infrastructure remains in place for any area of the State with accessibility issues.

Easton Utilities supports this bill's intention to fund and support those areas within the State of Maryland where affordability and literacy are very real problems. We see these issues in our existing internet service territory, so we provide a "lifeline" service option for our low-income customers. Easton Utilities has also partnered with Talbot County Public Schools (TCPS) and their education foundation to provide free internet services to students who are on the school's free or reduced lunch program allowing them to use the iPads provided by TCPS at home.

The Office of Rural Broadband has been very successful delivering on its current mission to provide funding for those areas with broadband accessibility issues due to limited or no infrastructure in place from an Internet Service Provider (ISP). Several areas of Maryland where no broadband infrastructure existed now have design or construction underway because of the Office of Rural Broadband, but many areas still need this support. Addressing the affordability

and literacy issues mentioned above cannot happen unless this critical infrastructure is already in place first.

There is language within this bill which has the potential to reduce or eliminate access to federal funding for areas of Maryland where accessibility remains the biggest problem. The amendments proposed by the Rural Maryland Council would address this issue while also maintaining the intention of the bill to support affordability and literacy issues throughout Maryland.

Chairman Davis, for the reasons stated above and in the interest of keeping the successful broadband infrastructure funding in place while also addressing the very real affordability and literacy issues in Maryland, Easton Utilities supports this bill, with amendments, and respectfully requests a Favorable report on HB 97 with the amendments recommended by the Rural Maryland Council included.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John J. Horner, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

John J. Horner, Jr.
Sr. Vice President & COO
Easton Utilities
410.763-9493

Cc: Hugh Grunden
Steve Ochse