

Testimony in Support of  
Senate Bill 824 – Economic Development – Broadband Providers – Joint Trenching and Fee (Building  
Out Broadband Act of 2021)  
Finance Committee  
March 16, 2021

The Rural Maryland Council **supports with amendments** Senate Bill 824. The bill would rename the Rural Broadband Assistance Fund to the Maryland Digital Connectivity Fund, , alter the use of the Fund to include providing certain financial assistance to authorities to expand high-speed Internet access in certain areas of the State, allow joint trenching by broadband providers with the permission of local units of government and the Department of Transportation, and authorizing the Department of Transportation, and units of local government under certain circumstances, to charge a fee to certain broadband providers for joint trenching

The Council's 2020 Rural Issues survey found the lack of broadband to be the greatest concern in rural Maryland. Having access to fast and reliable internet has become increasingly essential over the past several years and even more so during the recent months of the pandemic. Many children must now rely on the internet to attend class and complete schoolwork, and many adults are now working from home. Other services such as telehealth visits have also become more popular during this time, allowing patients to have medical examinations administered from the safety of their homes. In a time of growing dependency on technology, these trends are certain to continue after the end of the pandemic.

Allowing joint trenching would help expand broadband across the state. By allowing broadband wires to be installed along trenches underground it would provide more options for households to be wired to broadband internet. Joint trenching would also be providing a safer means of delivery. By placing wires underground, there is no longer as much risk of human interference, such as someone wrecking into a pole, or damage and interference from the elements, such as lightening, ice, wind, or trees falling on the wires.

*According to the Technical Guide to Dig Once Policies April 2017* released by ctc Technology and Engineering, requiring simultaneous underground construction and co-location of broadband infrastructure can reduce the cost of broadband installation. The price of fiber optic cables and conduit will only result in roughly a quarter of the cost of new construction or less than \$40,000 per mile, while the costs coming from labor, permitting and engineering results in a total fiber construction cost of almost \$200,000 per mile for standalone projects. Because underground construction is already taking place and more than one entity will be using the area at a time, coordinated construction efforts result in less costs of labor and materials compared to standalone projects. Other cost reductions include engineering and surveying, permits, traffic control, leasing access to private easements, and trenching or boring. Additionally, with an increase in infrastructure work on the nation's roads and highways, there will be more opportunities for the implementation of broadband networks through joint trenching.

The Council suggests that the fee to providers for joint trenching be removed from the bill and a summer study be conducted on the potential fees to the providers. This is to assure that no unintentional costs will be passed onto the buyers.

We ask that the bill be amended to be consistent with Senate Bill 66 and that the Committee strike the renaming of the Rural Broadband Assistance Fund. This Fund has provided grants to local jurisdictions for construction and infrastructure projects related to broadband and is available to receive federal funds. Keeping the fund will also show to potential funders the State's support of rural broadband expansion.

The rural Maryland Council respectfully asks for a **favorable with amendments** report on Senate Bill 824.

*The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) is an independent state agency governed by a nonpartisan, 40-member board that consists of inclusive representation from the federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. We bring together federal, state, county and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions.*

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