

Public Testimony – LD 256 – An Act to Provide Continued Availability of High-Speed Broadband Internet at Maine’s Schools and Libraries

Bryce Cundick – February 14, 2017

Senator Woodsome, Representative Berry, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities, and Technology. My name is Bryce Cundick – a resident of Farmington and the current President of the Maine Library Association. Today I am testifying in support of the LD 256.

As Maine moves further into the digital age, one area where we are being left behind by many other states is residential and private business Internet speeds. When I moved to Maine nine years ago, I was disappointed by how much slower broadband options were in my home in Farmington, and I was close to town. Many of my friends further away had even more limited speeds at higher prices.

The infrastructure in Maine is slowly catching up with the rest of the nation, but this is typically limited to the relatively larger urban regions of our state. Rural areas continue to trail behind the curve. This is a barrier for people who want to move to the area, just as slow Internet speeds are a barrier for people thinking of moving their business to Maine.

The argument could be made that rural areas do not need the same robust Internet infrastructure as cities like Portland or Augusta. The population they serve is smaller, and the demand will therefore be less strenuous.

With all of this providing a backdrop, the Maine School Library Network (MSLN) was built to ensure equity among participants, and in doing so, ensures rural schools and libraries have access to a robust internet connection (a minimum of 100 Mbps). This is vitally important as the MSLN does not choose winners and losers – the MSLN ensures that all schools and libraries have equitable network access. Maine citizens should be able to know they can go into any library in the state and receive comparable service. Libraries strive to do that with books and materials through our van delivery service and interlibrary loan, but even then things can’t be 100% equitable. There’s a time delay between when a book is requested and when it’s available to a patron.

Broadband access is one area where we can truly offer the same service throughout the state. The difficult part has already been accomplished. MSLN is up and running and providing invaluable service to many Maine residents and students. Usage has grown as more residents learn of this offering, and that use will only grow in the future. All we need to do is ensure that the network is maintained. That it has the funding necessary to keep it current and running.

Libraries across the state are already dealing with many different financial burdens. Many of them rely on local property taxes to fund a large part of their mission. As property taxes have been forced to cover a bigger share of school budgets and the like, local leaders have naturally looked for areas where costs can be trimmed. Libraries should not be viewed as expendable. They are a vibrant, thriving part of our towns, despite efforts by some to portray them as dusty remnants of a distant past. Anyone who has used a modern library can attest to the reality: usage is up, services are up, and the future is bright for libraries in our state and our nation.

But this future is at risk. If LD256 is not passed, the financial burden to maintain this network will shift more and more to local libraries (and schools), and we have already seen the results of that shift. Local towns are much more focused on the immediate benefits to their population. They are not in the position to consider the larger benefits to the state as a whole. That's the role of state government and funding. LD256 will maintain the MSLN at the level necessary to keep Maine and all its citizens, rural and urban, rich and poor, connected to the increasingly necessary resources found online.

Thank you.