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Testimony of Peggy Schaffer
Small Business Advocate
Speaking on behalf of the Maine Broadband Coalition
In Favor of LD 256

An Act To Ensure Continued Availability of High-speed Broadband Internet at Maine's Schools and Libraries

Senator Woodsome, Representative Berry, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology, my name is Peggy Schaffer. I am the Small Business Advocate in the Secretary of State's Office and I am here today as the co-chair of the Maine Broadband Coalition.

The Maine Broadband Coalition is a statewide volunteer organization that is united around the goal of universal access to high-speed broadband across every part of Maine. The Maine School Library Network is an essential part of that goal, and it is critical that Maine maintains that network for schools, communities and businesses.

The ability to connect through a high speed connection is critical for students, business people, tourist and residents. It is not at all unusual to find people sitting outside libraries – in their cars or on a bench – using the library connection because it's the only one they have.

One day last summer I was on Water Street in Lubec, just before dinner time. Sitting outside the library was a man working on his laptop in what was clearly something for his work. He was in shorts and a t-shirt, and most likely a visitor to that community. There are lots of places in Lubec with poor connectivity. But the library is not one of them. Having the ability to go to the Library and get a high speed connection likely made the difference for this tourist, and many others people, to be able to come to Lubec vacation, live and work. This same scenario is repeated all over rural Maine, with tourists, summer residents, students, and small business people.

Until more of rural Maine has some form of high speed access to the internet – having our libraries and our schools connected will be the central piece of how our communities stay connected. This bill directs the PUC to bring together the stakeholders to figure out a funding solution over the next year. While discussions have been ongoing, giving this specific charge to the PUC to come up with a solution to funding this vital network is a good idea.

The Internet of Things is not going away, and having our schools and libraries connected is a very basic need. Maine cannot afford to lose this critical piece of our broadband infrastructure.