



Sharon Meieran

Multnomah County Commissioner, District 1

To: House House Committee On Economic Development
From: Sharon Meieran, Multnomah County Commissioner
Date: February 11, 2019
Re: Support for House Bill 2173

Chair Lively, Vice Chairs Bonham and Fahey, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 2173 which sets forth some critical values that Multnomah County shares in support of public policies that narrow the digital divide and advance broadband internet access as the next public utility.

In 2016, Multnomah County and the City of Portland adopted a [Digital Equity Action Plan](#) which indicates that 15% of Portland-area households do not have internet access at home. This includes 18% of households with incomes under \$30,000 annually, 28% of those 65 and older and 30% of Latino households. We know that today, access to reliable, high-speed internet is not a luxury but a necessity -- schools increasingly require students to complete homework online, job seekers are often required to file applications online, and more activities go “paperless” every day, like paying bills or purchasing public transit passes. As our lives move further online, we must work to mitigate the very real negative impact that inequitable internet access can have in our communities.

Last year, I advocated through our budget process for Multnomah County to allocate funds for a feasibility study to assess whether municipal broadband could be a cost-effective, practical solution to help us achieve our digital equity goals. Multnomah County is now collaborating with Gresham, Troutdale, Fairview, Wood Village, and Portland to fund and work with a research firm to conduct this study. In addition to advancing our digital equity goals, other potential benefits of municipal broadband include improving access to reliable high-speed internet for *all* residents, fostering innovation and economic growth, attracting businesses to the region, and serving as the basis for a technology infrastructure for the 21st century.

As we work on this issue locally, we are very supportive of the aligned values in House Bill 2173. The bill creates an Oregon Broadband Office with clear directives to: advocate for public policies to close the digital divide; develop broadband strategies for underserved areas; promote cooperative, local broadband planning and solutions; and engage with a wide range of stakeholders. These duties signal a powerful statement of values around inclusion, access, and fairness -- values that Multnomah County supports wholeheartedly. Given that reliable home broadband access is increasingly essential for school, work, and life, we also hope that the Oregon Broadband Office will analyze new data and incorporate evolving concepts into its work.

We look forward to collaborating with the state in our shared work toward equitable digital access, and are pleased to support House Bill 2173.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon Meieran