

Senator Torrey Westrom
Chair, Agriculture and Rural Development Finance and Policy
Minnesota Senate Building, Room 1150
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Representative Mike Sundin
Chair, Agriculture Finance and Policy
417 State Office Building
Saint Paul, MN 55155

May 3, 2021

Dear Chairs, Westrom and Sundin,

Minnesota is in jeopardy of falling further behind in the expansion of high-speed quality broadband with the proposed funding for the Office of Broadband contained in the bill before your conference committee. The proposed one year of funding by the House, leaves communities and providers in limbo not knowing if they should invest in the pre-planning, design and even engineering of a project should funding in subsequent years not be available. The funding in the Senate version is more generous but is reliant on Federal funds to boost the funding to the level it needs to be at if the State is to reach the legislative goal of 25 down/3 up mbps for all Minnesotans by 2022.

In previous reports the Minnesota Governor's Task Force on Broadband determined that for the State to meet the legislative goal it would require \$67 million dollars per year being allocated for broadband. This past biennium only \$40 million was allocated. The Range Association of Municipalities and Schools, (RAMS) represents far too many communities who are still considered underserved, many unserved with broadband. RAMS also represents 15 public school districts with thousands of rural students who suffered significant setbacks in their educational growth when forced to stay home and utilize virtual school without adequate broadband.

RAMS is also concerned that a change in the language or policy provisions of the omnibus bill that would add that "fixed wireless" be included in the definition of broadband. While technology continues to advance in the wireless broadband spectrum, the addition of that into the definition at this time would likely result in many rural areas of the state be ineligible for State Border to Border grants as well as other funding opportunities. While a resident with a clear line of sight to a wireless tower may have adequate service, the resident two blocks away in a tree covered parcel may not be able to receive a signal but be considered in a "served" census block.

RAMS strongly encourages that as chairs of your respective legislative bodies on the Conference Committee we ask that you strive to fund the Office of Broadband and the very successful grant program at the level it requires, \$120 million for the biennium. Waiting for a federal rescue on this vital utility for all Minnesotans will not accomplish anything for those of us who are living in the underserved areas of the state.

"One Range...One Voice"

Thank you for your service and for your support for broadband funding.

On Behalf of the RAMS Board of Directors,



Steve Giorgi/Executive Director

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Cc; Iron Range Delegation Members
RAMS Board of Directors

Range Association of Municipalities and Schools (RAMS) The organization represents more than 78,000 residents and 57 public sector units of government, including 27 cities, 15 public school districts and 14 townships, in the 13,000 square mile Taconite Assistance Area (TAA) of northeast Minnesota. As an organization, RAMS has represented the interests of the Iron Range region for over 80 years.