

STATE OF TENNESSEE



April 9, 2009

The Honorable Gary Locke
Secretary, U.S. Department of Commerce
Office of the Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Anna Gomez
Acting Assistant Secretary, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information
Office of the Assistant Secretary, National Telecommunications & Information Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Vilsack, Secretary Locke and Assistant Secretary Gomez:

The Tennessee Broadband Task Force (“TBTF”) hereby submits these comments to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (“NTIA”) and the Rural Utilities Service (“RUS”) pursuant to a joint request for information.¹ The TBTF was created by the General Assembly in 2005 to examine the deployment of broadband in the state. As part of our statutory obligation to study broadband, the TBTF has examined the impact of regulation, cost, access to facilities, and market competition on deployment and adoption of broadband services.² One of the early actions of the TBTF was to recommend contracting with Connected Nation to conduct mapping of broadband and implementation of strategies designed to enhance awareness and increase adoption of broadband services in our state.

The TBTF directs its comments to the portion of the notice concerning the role of states in distribution of funds from the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (“BTOP”). While NTIA has the responsibility for distributing BTOP funds, Congress required the NTIA to consult with states concerning “the allocation of grant funds within that State for projects in or affecting the State.”³ The TBTF urges the NTIA to afford states the primary responsibility for evaluating grant proposals within their domain. We

¹ Joint Request for Information and Notice of Public Meetings, 74 Fed Reg. 10716 (March 12, 2009).

² Tennessee Public Chapter 413

³ American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Sec. 6001(c)(2).

also urge that no state be left behind or excluded in receiving BTOP grant funds. One approach that would grant states sufficient input into the grant allocation process would be to allow the Governor of each state to designate an entity to review and rank all applications for in-state projects based upon criteria developed by the NTIA and the RUS.

The advantages of allowing state involvement in the manner described above are significant. First, state involvement allows efforts to expand broadband deployment and adoption to be integrated with other economic development and job creation programs stemming from other funds made available by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (“ARRA”) or existing state programs. Absent significant state involvement, NTIA grants may fund projects that are duplicative of other state efforts or otherwise will not provide maximal benefits given other state economic development activities. Secondly, states that have taken a lead and already have detailed knowledge of their communications markets, demography and geography, which is necessary to ensure grant funds are directed to the most beneficial projects, are in the best position to identify shovel-ready projects which will promote economic stimulus. Tennessee has the publicly funded Connected Tennessee program, which provides specific information on the deployment and adoption of broadband. The information made available by Connected Tennessee will allow for more effective allocation of stimulus funds by our state government. Finally, states have staff available to evaluate grant proposals and, as discussed above, access to the information necessary to evaluate proposals. Given the many existing duties and priorities of the NTIA coupled with the large number of expected grant applications and the short statutory time frame in which grants funds must be distributed, states have the personnel resources on hand to assist in evaluating grant proposals.

In sum, the TBTF advocates that each state should receive an allocation of BTOP funds and that there should be a significant state role in the evaluation of BTOP grant proposals. Such a role for states is necessary to achieve greater deployment and adoption of essential broadband services and to maximize the economic development and job creation impact of the ARRA.

Respectfully,



Senator Roy Herron, Co-Chairman
Tennessee Broadband Task Force



Representative Mark Maddox, Co-Chairman
Tennessee Broadband Task Force