



Jeff Wick, President and General Manager of WTC

Senate Utilities Committee

Proponent for HB 2618

March 11, 2020

Good afternoon Chairman Masterson and members of the Senate Utilities Committee. I am Jeff Wick, President and General Manager of WTC in Wamego. I appear before you on behalf of the Kansas Rural Independent Telecommunication Coalition (KRITC) and the State Independent Telephone Association (SITA) as a proponent of HB 2618.

The Legislature created the Broadband Task Force in 2018 to review the status of broadband availability in Kansas and come up with recommendations. Catherine Moyer, CEO of Pioneer Communications served on the Broadband Task Force with you and Chairman Seiwert and was also named chair of one of the subcommittees.

KRITC attended all the meetings and listened to a variety of people that pointed out that broadband is no longer a luxury item for residents or companies. It has become necessity for business, education, health care, agriculture and our own personal lives.

HB 2618 reflects the views expressed by the Task Force members and the conferees that asked for Kansas to do more to address the digital divide. HB 2618 would allow Kansas to join approximately 30 other states that have established broadband programs to help address gaps in service that exist in our state. Just by establishing a statewide broadband office and program, Kansas will be able to apply for and hopefully receive federal funding that we are not receiving at this time. Also, it would designate a central repository – Department of Commerce -for cities, providers and any other interested person to get timely and accurate information about the various federal programs that are available.

I appear before you in support of HB 2618 because it establishes a broadband program that incorporates a number of themes that were widely supported by the task force members: 1) housing the program in the Department of Commerce; 2) creates a challenge process so the funds will not be used to duplicate what a what is already deployed by a provider; 3) allows the

Department of Commerce the flexibility to set minimum speed standards so that these standards can change as technology changes. In our discussions with the Department of Commerce, they also want to establish rules so that the state funding will not go to any area that is currently receiving other funding, which would mirror the desire of the federal programs to not duplicate funding in any area.

HB 2618 fits well with the FORWARD bill (SB 375) which focuses on addressing infrastructure issues. While the focus of SB 375 is our highway system, the bill puts \$5 Million into a broadband infrastructure grant program that will operate in cooperation with the Department of Commerce. While funding will always be important, we would encourage you to not focus on the amount it will take to solve all the issues immediately but instead focus on starting the process immediately. Iowa illustrates what can be done with a smaller investment. Iowa implemented a broadband program and spent \$5 Million in 2019, which funded 17 rural broadband projects. Iowa is not unusual for the beginning of a program, most of the programs started with smaller funding amounts and have grown as the programs have proven to be beneficial to the economic and social welfare of the state. Additionally, this bill proposes that this will be a 50% match program to ensure the dollars will be leveraged even further in deploying broadband across Kansas.

Establishing a broadband program is a good step for Kansas and I appreciate the Broadband Task Force's hard work resulted in the drafting of this bill that that will help bring better connectivity to Kansans across the state.

I respectfully ask you pass HB 2618 out favorably. I am happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.