



range association
of municipalities
and schools

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The Honorable Mike Sundin, State Representative
The Honorable Alice Hausman, State Representative
The Honorable Mike Howard, State Representative
The Honorable Smantha Vang, State Representative
The Honorable Tama Theis, State Representative

The Honorable Torey Westrom, State Senator
The Honorable Rich Draheim, State Senator
The Honorable Gene Dornink, State Senator
The Honorable Eric Pratt, State Senator
The Honorable Kari Kziedzic, State Senator

May 9, 2022

SENT VIA E-MAIL

Dear Omnibus Agriculture, Finance, Housing, and Broadband Conference Committee members,

I write to you on behalf of the Range Association of Municipalities and Schools (RAMS), representing over 75,000 residents of northern Minnesota and over 60 units of government including 26 towns, 15 public school districts and 21 townships on the Iron Range. RAMS has been advocating on behalf of these local units of government for over 80 years. We know that you are doing important work right now, joining the bills of the House and Senate to something agreeable to both parties.

We hope that you will take into consideration our firsthand experience working with providers and local units of government on broadband deployment. In the last few months, we have been hosting meetings with communities who are unserved in terms of high-speed internet or broadband. While there are some locations in northern MN that do have coverage, there are still far too many communities where residents have no service. This impacts their ability to work remotely, run businesses efficiently, and study for school. In our state today, over 240,000 households are without access to highspeed internet. Minnesota has set a goal that every household should have 25/3 service by 2022 and we are now failing at that goal.

We are very pleased that the current proposed language will increase the Border-to-Border match to up to 75% and we feel this will have real results in the hard to serve communities that are remote and have less dense populations. We also fully support raising the \$5 million cap to \$10 million due to the high cost of some of these remaining unserved areas. Areas such as Crane Lake township, which is on the edge of the Voyageurs National Park. They have approximately 80 year-round residents, while in the summer, they have an influx of seasonal residents in addition to tourists and visitors. Since they are located over 35 miles away from the nearest town, it has been a challenge to find a provider willing to install the service they need at the high cost it will take to provide.

Another example is Balkan Township, a community right outside of Chisholm, MN. To ensure that all their residents have broadband, the estimate for the project is over \$6 million. The potential providers can put in some of their own monetary resources, but without border-to-border funds, these projects simply won't move forward due to the high cost. With the current Border to Border language for example, the project could get an amount of 50%, which would be \$3 million. If the provider was able to put in 25%, that would still leave the township facing a gap of \$1,500,000. With an annual operating levy of just \$300,000, that is simply untenable. The impact to the citizens for having to raise the rest of the funding would be impossible.

Northern and other rural communities face different challenges when deploying broadband. We have low density areas, hard bedrock and geographically challenged areas. We know that \$25 million for the entire state Border to Border program for the year is not nearly enough and we support the higher amount that the Senate has put forth of \$110 million. Furthermore, we would ask that the state leadership consider this money being from state general dollar funds. If our state wants to be a leader for the future of all our citizens, we ask that the state fully fund the Border-to-Border program, support the language changes from 50% to 75% and the dollar amount increase from \$5

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million to \$10 million. This will start us in the right direction towards connecting all of Minnesota, enabling rural and urban residents alike to access telemedicine, work remotely and study for school from home.

There are several providers here in northern Minnesota who are ready to go with numerous projects across northern MN and there are communities whose residents are desperately waiting for their turn of being 'hooked up'. We just need the grant funding allocated so that the fiber can get into the ground. Thank you for all the work you are doing for our state and for considering our position on broadband.

Sincerely,



Ida Rukavina

Executive Director

CC: Iron Range Legislative Delegation