

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.
Communications and Technology Subcommittee

Hearing on “Breaking Barriers: Streamlining Permitting to Expedite Broadband Deployment”

April 19, 2023

Bridging the digital divide has been a top priority of this Committee for years, and in 2021, Democrats delivered on that promise with passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. This law made historic investments in broadband that will help connect millions of Americans to high-speed, affordable, and reliable broadband regardless of income or zip code. I look forward to discussing today how we can build upon the investments we’ve already made to continue bridging the divide.

For years, House Democrats have championed the need to make government investments in areas where the private markets have failed to build out broadband networks equitably and affordably. For too many people in these communities, the lack of high-speed, reliable internet means not having the opportunity to do basic things that many of us now take for granted—like applying for jobs, telehealth appointments, or completing schoolwork from home.

All told, the Biden Administration will provide more than \$60 billion across a number of programs to bring state of the art broadband networks to families and households in primarily unserved and rural communities, Tribal lands, and other unconnected areas across the country.

The overwhelming majority of these funds have yet to be distributed, and therefore the hard work of ensuring these funds and projects reach the people who need them most remains ahead of us. It is critical that we ensure states and communities are prepared to receive these funds and get projects moving quickly and efficiently. If there are impediments or delays that might jeopardize the smooth implementation of these programs, then we want to know about them.

It is important for this Committee to hear from expert witnesses about potential issues, but that is not the point of today’s hearing. Republicans have skipped right past an examination of the issues to potential solutions, which is unfortunate and defies logic. The Subcommittee should first take the time to identify where the problems are before examining solutions.

This legislative hearing is, in my opinion, too broad. The 30 Republican discussion drafts on the agenda span a vast number of issues, amend a number of different federal laws, impact a number of different industry sectors, and state and local autonomy. The Republican Majority

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invited four witnesses to cover these bills, and yet the Chair rejected our request for a second Democratic witness for the panel. I have deep concerns about that imbalance and the precedent it sets—especially because the Republican Majority skipped holding an informational hearing.

I believe that any discussion of these issues that does not include states and municipalities, Tribal representatives, environmental justice communities, and other experts with relevant testimony is incomplete.

The Republican Majority's actions are inconsistent with their calls for bipartisan collaboration and unfortunately may make it harder to work together on these bills moving forward.

To be clear, if there are real obstacles in deploying broadband universally, we want to know about them and find ways to address them. But some of the Republican proposals before us today are supposed solutions to problems that simply do not exist.

In fact, one of the clearest obstacles to reliable and affordable internet are state laws in more than a dozen states that prohibit municipalities from competing in the free market to build or operate their own broadband network if they choose. Representative Eshoo's "Community Broadband Act" is critical to ensuring flexibility and competition for communities that want to provide this service for their residents— which is a successful model in many states.

Representative Fletcher's "Broadband Incentives for Communities Act" would kickstart deployment efforts by providing resources to communities to deal with the influx of applications for these projects and others.

These two bills are real solutions as we bridge the digital divide.