

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Representative Jerry McNerney**

Hearing on “Connecting America: Oversight of NTIA”

February 16, 2022

Today’s hearing comes at a critical time in our country’s history for the delivery of high-speed, reliable, and affordable broadband to all Americans. Never before has Congress and the President made such a bold investment, \$65B, to connect Americans to one of the most valuable resources in the 21st century—the internet. And the pivotal agency that is going to help us cross the finish line and reach this important goal is the one before us today—the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA).

NTIA plays a key role in developing and overseeing telecommunications and technology policy for this country. Indeed, Congress long ago designated NTIA as the President’s primary advisor on these critical policy issues. It is not surprising that in the bipartisan infrastructure law, we in Congress designated NTIA to administer this historic \$65 billion investment to connect Americans across the country to reliable, high-speed, and affordable broadband. This is certainly a big responsibility to place on one agency. But with the recent confirmation of Mr. Alan Davidson, our witness today, we now have someone who is up to the task at hand.

The bipartisan infrastructure law is poised to have a massive impact on the roughly 30 million Americans who currently cannot connect to the internet. As we all have learned during the Covid-19 pandemic, broadband is the foundation that allows so many American workers to support their families, our children to expand their horizons and complete their homework, and all of us to strengthen our bonds with family and friends even when we are thousands of miles apart.

I am particularly pleased that the bipartisan infrastructure law included my Digital Equity Act. There is no doubt that the over \$45 billion, in the law, to fund the build-out of new networks will help communities in my district and across the country. But universal connectivity does not stop at network access. Families need to be able to afford the service, and individuals must have the devices and the technical skills to use the service for their needs.

The Digital Equity Act provides funding to all 50 states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico to develop state digital equity plans that identify barriers faced by their residents in accessing broadband. Once those state plans are completed, it will fund projects to address the barriers identified in the plans to make sure the goal of universal connectivity is meaningful to everyone.

The bipartisan infrastructure law though does not stop there. Even for those who may have physical access to these networks and the skills to take advantage of them, a challenge remains for many about finding plans that can deliver these high-speed broadband services at affordable prices. In today’s economy, broadband is a necessity; no family should have to choose between the internet and other basic household needs. So, I am pleased that the bipartisan infrastructure law makes tangible investments in broadband affordability so that we

can ensure that economically vulnerable households are not put in a position to make difficult decisions such as deciding what essential services to do without. These investments include the Affordable Connectivity Program at the FCC, but also the low-cost option that recipients of the deployment program administered by the NTIA are required to provide. These are two separate and distinct ways to address broadband affordability and will no doubt separately ensure broadband is affordable to people across the country.

Lastly, but certainly not least, we have all seen in recent months—thanks to a trend that began in the last administration—what happens when NTIA and the FCC do not row in the same direction. Thanks to the hard work of NTIA, the FCC, and others in the last few weeks, we have finally begun to see some progress in resolving the spectrum disputes left over by the Trump Administration. Even better, we saw yesterday that NTIA and the FCC have announced a new spectrum coordination initiative to ensure that our government once again speaks with one voice on spectrum management matters.

And it doesn't stop there—the NTIA is also working on cutting edge issues like Artificial Intelligence and cybersecurity that will benefit us all. For all the reasons, I am pleased to have Mr. Davidson with us today and I look forward to the conversation. And with that, the Chair yields back.