

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 2, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Steny Hoyer
Majority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jim Clyburn
Majority Whip
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader Hoyer, and Whip Clyburn:

Thank you for your continued support of efforts to reach a bipartisan deal on infrastructure. As you know, today's economic recovery presents us with the opportunity to not only include rural America, but also ensure that these communities can continue to thrive for generations to come. This includes but is not exclusive to significant investment to expand access to high-speed internet. However, the success of this investment and others is contingent on measures to ensure taxpayer dollars go where they should and that funds are sent to areas of the country that are in need.

Lessons from recent history, such as the recovery from the 2009 financial crisis, can ensure we do right by rural and underserved communities. Although the data following that recovery indicated that the country overall saw economic improvement up until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reality was that rural America did not see the same benefits as urban areas. This was, in part, due to a failure to deliver broadband to areas of the country where it was most needed. In 2013, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Inspector General issued a report finding that the agency could have implemented certain broadband programs created by the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* in a manner that focused more on rural residents who lacked access to broadband. Specifically, the report stated the following: "the agency did not adequately ensure that broadband infrastructure projects funded by [Broadband Initiatives Program] actually provided access to rural residents who would otherwise lack access."

To avoid repeating these mistakes, the funds in an infrastructure bill to expand broadband must be sent where the need is greatest, and programs must have the flexibility to ensure that rural areas are not left out. In addition to providing flexibility, implementation should not translate to a slower-tier of internet access just for rural Americans. The best technology should not only be available in our cities and suburbs.

We were encouraged to see the Biden-Harris Administration recognize the importance of targeting unserved and underserved areas for broadband infrastructure funds under the American Rescue Plan. We hope that the upcoming infrastructure package will build on that success and that improved data collection can better target broadband investments in unserved and underserved communities. In our districts, we have seen firsthand how a continued lack of access to reliable high-speed internet created an insurmountable obstacle to success for rural residents that has been compounded by the COVID-19 crisis. A lack of high-speed internet affects the ability of businesses—including farms and ranches—to access domestic and international markets; it prevents families from receiving health care remotely through telehealth medicine, and students cannot get a quality education.

Throughout our nation’s history, both parties have recognized that innovation spurs the need to expand new infrastructure to rural America to keep our country at the cutting edge of international competition, such as rural electrification under President Franklin Roosevelt and the expansion of the interstate highway system under President Dwight Eisenhower. If done right in the current recovery, investment to bring every community online would be a major step to strengthen the rural economy, address the rural health care crisis, and empower rural workers all while strengthening the larger American economy.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



REP. TOM O’HALLERAN (AZ-01)
Chair, Task Force on Strengthening Rural America
Co-Chair for Communications
Blue Dog Coalition



REP. KURT SCHRADER (OR-05)
Co-Chair
Blue Dog Coalition



REP. STEPHANIE MURPHY (FL-07)
Co-Chair for Administration
Blue Dog Coalition



REP. ED CASE (HI-01)
Co-Chair for Policy
Blue Dog Coalition



REP. JIM COOPER (TN-05)
Member
Blue Dog Coalition



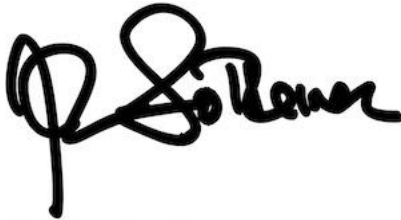
REP. JIM COSTA (CA-16)
Member
Blue Dog Coalition



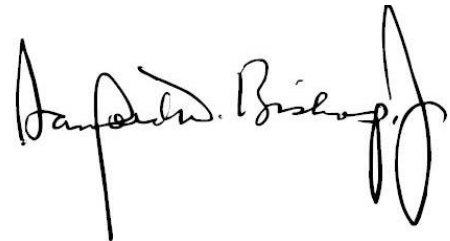
REP. ABIGAIL SPANBERGER (VA-07)
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