G. K. BUTTERFIELD
FIRST DISTRICT, NORTH CAROLINA

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

October 19, 2020

The Honorable Ajit Pai
Chair
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

Access to reliable, high-speed internet is more critical than ever, as Americans have turned to broadband for online learning, remote work, telehealth, and to keep in touch with loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic. And yet, significant numbers of Americans remain on the wrong side of the digital divide, particularly in rural communities where at least 15 million Americans still lack access to high speed internet.[1]

There has never been a more urgent time to address these issues, and I am dedicated to tackling the problem from all angles by using every available tool that we have. This includes addressing the many obstacles that stand in the way of expanding broadband services to all Americans and especially those in unserved rural communities.

While federal resources play an important role in expanding broadband access to all Americans, we must also remove unnecessary barriers that impede private broadband investment into the unserved communities that need it most. Removing these impediments will not only increase private investment, but it will encourage new market entrants. The powerful combination of federal resources and increased private investment will accelerate broadband expansion while protecting taxpayer dollars.

One barrier to rural broadband deployment that can be addressed immediately by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) involves a clarification of its existing pole attachment rules. Much of the country's broadband infrastructure is carried by cables attached to utility poles, which provide a crucial link between many rural homes and businesses across the country. Given the critical nature of pole access, the FCC's pole attachment rules were developed at the direction of Congress to ensure fair and timely access.

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[1] https://www.fcc.gov/about-fcc/fcc-initiatives/bridging-digital-divide-all-americans

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In the Telecommunications Act of 1996 Congress granted the FCC broad authority to craft regulations that balance the rights and responsibilities of pole owners with those who need to attach to them. Too often, however, the process of adding new broadband infrastructure to these poles has been inefficient and cumbersome. The process today routinely involves a complex web of owners and regulators across different jurisdictions that increases costs and delays – and even prevents – rural broadband buildout.

Accordingly, I encourage the FCC to move quickly to clarify its existing rules regarding utility pole access. Such a clarification should ensure a transparent, fair, and fast process for accessing utility poles, resulting in more rural broadband deployment to unserved households. A more expedient process will shorten the time it takes to build out broadband in rural areas and reduce costs, which means more resources for the unserved communities that need them most.

Now is the time to ensure that every American has access to reliable, high-speed internet. I hope that you will stand with me to expand opportunity for all Americans – particularly those in rural America – by connecting them to the internet.

Thank you very much.

Very truly yours,

G. K. Butterfield
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Michael O'Rielly, Commissioner
        The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel, Commissioner
        The Honorable Brendan Carr, Commissioner
        The Honorable Geoffrey Starks, Commissioner