

July 26, 2024

Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
45 L Street NE
Washington, D.C. 20554

Re: WC Docket No. 17-84, *Accelerating Wireline Broadband Deployment by Removing Barriers to Infrastructure Investment*

Dear Ms. Dortch:

The Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband (SHLB) Coalition and the other organizations listed below submit this letter into the record of the above-mentioned proceeding.

SHLB and the organizations set forth below have consistently supported providing affordable and high-quality broadband to anchor institutions and the communities they serve. We have advocated for Congressional, Administration, and Federal Communications Commission (FCC or Commission) efforts to close the rural broadband gap and digital divide by promoting broadband deployment to every corner of our country. This support and advocacy includes identifying and removing barriers to investment and deployment of critical broadband infrastructure. Accordingly, we appreciate the FCC's continued focus on ensuring timely and efficient access to the pole infrastructure that is so critical to broadband deployment.

The Commission's action late last year to improve the regulation of pole attachments was a significant step to resolving some of the open issues regarding pole attachment and replacement policies. We were also encouraged that the Commission released a Third Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking ("Third FNPRM") in this proceeding to make additional improvements to the pole attachment process. Since the initial and reply comments were filed in February and March respectively, we encourage the Commission to bring the Third FNPRM to a close and issue an order that further improves the pole attachment process.

About one month ago, federal and state policymakers, community leaders, and industry representatives gathered for a SHLB Coalition-led [Poles Symposium](#). While the program intentionally included a diversity of views, it was clear that there is still a substantial amount of uncertainty about how to address pole attachment and replacement issues. We all believe that stakeholders at all levels have a role to play in facilitating the resolution of these open issues and that the FCC can and should exercise a leadership role in fostering solutions. We have a deep interest in helping the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program and other federal and state broadband programs succeed, and we encourage further action now by the FCC to provide guidance that will help resolve remaining pole disputes and delays.

In particular, we support the Commission's proposal that would establish clearly defined timelines for "large order" pole application approvals for requests over 3,000 poles. The lack of clarity around timelines for these larger pole attachment approvals often results in delays and disputes that can slow or even stop projects altogether in unserved areas. Such large projects are only expected to grow

exponentially as the bulk of the \$42.5 billion in taxpayer-funded BEAD grants begin flowing into all U.S. states and territories next year. Clarity around timelines for processing these large bulk applications is more critical now than ever.

We also believe that the FCC can and should adopt clearly defined and equitable standards for pole replacement costs – an issue that was noticeably absent in the Fourth Report and Order and that remains pending. This cost allocation and pole replacement issue is receiving an increasing amount of attention among policymakers and the press, who have shared many real-world examples of pole replacement disputes as parties seek to shift pole costs from one party to the other.

We support a fair allocation of pole replacement costs between pole owners and attachers. Both pole owners and attachers derive benefits from a new pole when it is required. Typically, a new pole provides a pole owner with a new stronger and more resilient pole that will not need to be replaced again for decades, as well as additional capacity for more attachers and the added income that they provide. Moreover, pole attachers derive benefits from having access to the pole infrastructure managed by utilities and the ability to build out their broadband network. The burden of replacement costs should not be borne substantially by one party only.

Canada adopted rules last year requiring pole owners to bear at least 50 percent of the cost of pole replacements, given that they will own and benefit financially from the new pole. The Commission should do something similar and require that replacement costs be shared equitably between both the owner and attacher.

With billions of dollars on the line to connect unserved communities across the country, **now is the time for action**. We urge the Commission to advance our collective Internet for All goals by further breaking down pole access barriers. As always, we stand ready to provide support and assistance in any way possible.

Sincerely,



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