



State of Connecticut
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STATE CAPITOL
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06106-1591

REPRESENTATIVE ROBERTA B. WILLIS
SIXTY-FOURTH DISTRICT

LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING
ROOM 1802
HARTFORD, CT 06106-1591
CAPITOL: (860) 240-8585
TOLL FREE: (800) 842-8267
FAX: (860) 240-8833
E-MAIL: Roberta.Willis@cga.ct.gov

CHAIRMAN
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ADVANCEMENT COMMITTEE

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ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

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S.B. No. 331

“AN ACT ESTABLISHING A HIGH-SPEED INTERNET SERVICE PILOT PROGRAM”

Senator Osten, Representative Miller, Senator Linares, and Representative Aman, thank you for considering S.B. 331 *“An Act Establishing a High-Speed Internet Service Pilot Program.”*

For the record, I am State Representative Roberta Willis, representing the 64th District.

Senator Beth Bye and I have put forth this legislation that would require the Office of Policy and Management to establish high-speed Internet service pilot programs for urban and rural areas of the state. Connecticut’s municipalities are seeking to build community fiber internet networks through public-private partnerships.

As a legislator, I have heard frequently from my constituents that their service is too slow, too expensive, and too unreliable. Of even more concern are the thousands of citizens in our state who have no access to the internet at all, and who find themselves cut off from the online world that is now a fundamental tool of communication and commerce – simply an unacceptable situation in what is supposedly one of the most connected states in the country.

It is absolutely tragic for the unserved and underserved residents and businesses across Connecticut that this situation continues to this day.

I testified before the General Assembly in 2008 that, “This issue has continued to plague many of the small towns of NW Connecticut for years,” and “it is imperative that the state take action.” In spite of repeated entreaties by me and my constituents to the incumbent providers not much has changed.

I have long contended that it was a severe mistake years ago for government to fail to order the build out of broadband speed internet access, as properly happened over the last century with the telephone and electricity utilities. It is thus absolutely appropriate today for the municipalities with unserved or underserved areas to step in, with support from the state, to find a privately-funded solution, just as towns worked together in the last century to provide water and electricity through municipal systems when the private companies deemed it too expensive to serve towns.

A group of local leaders, composed of both town officials and residents, has formed a coalition known as “NWCONNect” and are moving ahead to find a solution. Local government officials took an initial step toward improving internet connectivity and cell phone service throughout the region. The Northwest Hills Council of Governments, 23 towns in northwest CT, voted unanimously to support our NWCONNect initiative.

If such a network was to be built, it would allow for broadband internet and improved cell phone coverage in communities that have limited service, or as is currently the case in parts of none at all.

It’s government’s job to react to the needs of the people and work to provide all of its citizens with adequate, affordable, reliable water, electricity, and in this century, internet access. I have demonstrated my concern for this issue over the last decade and this pilot program could provide us with the tools we need to act.

Joining me today is Jessica Fowler, a Selectwoman from the Town of Sharon and the chairperson of NWCONNect. She will provide more details on our efforts and why this pilot program is necessary.

Thank you again for considering this proposal, listening to our plight and hopefully support this proposal so we can move forward.

I would like to thank you for your consideration of this bill.