

Court of Common Council

CITY OF HARTFORD
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Date 3/11/2016

Chairs Senator Osten and Representative Miller and members of the Planning and Development Committee, my name is Thomas J. Clarke II and I serve President of the City of Hartford's Court of Common Council.

I am submitting this testimony in support of **S.B. 331, AN ACT ESTABLISHING A HIGH-SPEED INTERNET SERVICE PILOT PROGRAM.**

Hartford recognizes the value of this seed capital investment from the state to be used to start the process of developing plans and partners to build out a fiber network across underserved areas of the municipality.

Hartford believes that local businesses and other financial sources will see the merit in supporting Hartford's proposal to the state for this funding. We have heard from our constituents about the continuing challenges they face obtaining affordable broadband at adequate speeds, in particular from businesses in the North End and members of the Hartford Chamber of Commerce.

These broadband challenges impact, and will continue to impact, the economy of my city.

I have followed the CTgig Project and recognize the potential leveraging of the state's matching grant program for a municipal broadband project in our town. We believe that using this state seed funding, along with other local private funding, could be the foundation for a far larger investment by fiber network investors.

We believe that even a small scale project in Hartford could develop the pilot program into a fiber network to all premises in the town, including residential, business, and community anchor institutions.

The Pilot Program appears to be the fastest route to developing any municipal fiber builds in this state since municipalities such as ours need to leverage the small amounts of capital expenditure funds we possess in cooperation with other entities with demand for broadband, but facing a severe lack of adequate supply with high speeds and reasonable costs.

However, our municipalities need a little seed capital or financial backup from the state to develop feasibility studies and prepare themselves for their responsibilities as fiber network owners.

Many municipalities will find it difficult to commit to the infrastructure investment necessary to provide the ultra-high-speed Internet service being demanded by our businesses, hospitals, and other consumers without a Pilot Program like this.

Furthermore, the City of Hartford notes that while portions of the municipality are underserved, the use of the state's seed capital, combined with further leveraging of public and private funds, could be used to incent Frontier and Comcast to expand their infrastructure and service provision in the municipality.

The City of Hartford has the active population and municipal staff needed to demonstrate its ability to leverage its abundant resources in order to build a municipal dark fiber network to every premise in its territory that will be open to multiple service providers in an open access competitive market.

The City of Hartford has already demonstrated its commitment to using all the resources at its command to bring real connectivity to the community.

Hartford believes this pilot program is a very promising new model for ensuring greater access to high-quality broadband Internet across our town.

Hartford suffers from a broadband donut hole problem - the investment in better-than-dial-up is in our population center, leaving a donut of poor access around it. This pilot program will provide the initial action that can develop broadband access across our entire territory.

We see this as a significant step forward in creating competition and bringing high quality Internet access to everyone.

The City of Hartford recognizes that as our state legislature is considering allocating funds to improve internet access in un- or under-served areas, such as is found in Hartford, qualifying criteria is of course an important issue. We believe we can match those criteria and be successful with our proposal.

Hartford recognizes that grants will be awarded on a competitive basis, which ensures that only a small number of viable, “shovel ready” projects will be funded. We believe that this will result in some very innovative financing models that will maximize the private sector investment achieved for a relatively modest state and municipal investment. These pilot projects will serve as a proving ground for this public-private partnership model, which is thriving in so many other parts of the country.

The City of Hartford believes that if we can improve the presently poor access throughout our town, and we can receive some seed money from the state to put into improving that access in our economic center, we can actually get some economic development that will have a multiplier effect for the whole region.

The economic development and jobs creation issues facing Connecticut are obvious and the city believes that affordable high speed Internet access is a fundamental utility that is an essential and substantial physical element of any successful municipality.

While the City of Hartford supports the governor’s transportation projects as a necessary long term and large investment for the state, even in the current financial difficulties, it seems obvious to us that vibrant high-speed Internet access is equally as important today as roads and bridges and should be viewed as an integral part of our investment in revitalizing our transportation system

Telework and telecommuting, which is only possible with the kind of affordable, vibrant high-speed Internet access that is currently lacking in many residential and small business premises, should be part of the state’s transportation program. For every worker that can be productive without leaving their residence, that’s one less car using the already overburdened roads and bridges of the state.

We understand that Connecticut is being economically left behind by states like NY and MA that have well-funded and staffed state broadband agencies and substantial funding for municipal fiber network builds. In light of the \$500 million fund devoted to municipal fiber network development in New York State under Governor Cuomo, and the nearly \$100 million in actual fiber network construction that Massachusetts has pursued over the last decade, a corresponding commitment from Connecticut is clearly overdue to make the investments necessary to keep the state and its municipalities competitive.

The City of Hartford is concerned about competition from surrounding states and other markets in which our businesses compete. The state and our municipality could start to lose population, residents and businesses, and the tax base upon which we rely to keep our town vibrant and competitive. We are particularly concerned about the number of young people leaving our state in search of more vibrant and exciting opportunities in other states. This relatively modest investment by the state will help demonstrate that we are just as committed to creating an ecosystem of innovation and high-tech development.

It may sound overly dramatic, but if our state does not become competitive in providing high speed Internet access soon, the state's communities will start to die while towns in our surrounding states, that have received funding and fiber upgrades, will succeed at our expense.

Hartford is concerned that the state hasn't been taking our demands for greater Internet access seriously: if only two-thirds of our town had electricity that would not be tolerated. If only 75% of our residents had access to clean water, the area without clean water would be literally uninhabitable. We believe that high speed access to the Internet is a utility that all towns, indeed all premises, must be assured of having at reasonable prices.

In Hartford we concept design. We invest in equipment. We invest in technology. We invest in educating our employees, in making sure our populace understands what we're doing and where we all need to go. In short, we're organized and active, we do whatever it takes to make sure that we're able to compete so nobody can come in and take businesses and population from us. That's why we're so anxious to see this Pilot Program get passed into law, be funded, and let the competition for the successful proposals begin.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thomas J. Clarke II', written in a cursive style.

Thomas J. Clarke II, MBA
Council President