



Senator George S. LeMieux
Chairman of the Board of Trustees

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Comments to the Honorable Brad Drake, Chair, and members of the House Tourism, Infrastructure and Energy Subcommittee, Regarding HB 1543—Broadband Infrastructure

My name is Dominic M. Calabro and I am President and CEO of Florida TaxWatch, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit, taxpayer research institute & government watchdog which, for more than 42 years, has worked hard to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of Florida government and promote a fair and equitable system of taxation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of access to reliable and affordable high-quality broadband Internet service to our daily lives. Communities that currently lack access to the affordable, reliable, high-quality broadband internet that is necessary for full participation in education, health care, employment, social services and government programs, and civic life are at a marked disadvantage without that access. Having been exposed to the Internet it is difficult to imagine life without it. Yet, for more than 800,000 Floridians, Internet service, and the benefits associated with its use, are not available in their area.

The economic impacts associated with the delayed expansion of high-speed broadband Internet service to unserved areas are substantial. In Florida, the expansion of high-speed broadband Internet service into unserved areas is estimated to generate between \$2.25 billion and \$16.83 billion in economic gains, calculated as additional “willingness to pay.” Further, every month that the expansion of high-speed broadband Internet service into unserved areas is delayed costs Floridians between \$13.6 million and \$99.51 million in economic and social costs.

Last month, Florida TaxWatch released a research report entitled “[*Closing the Digital Divide: The Expansion of Broadband Internet Service to Unserved Areas of the State*](#),” that looked at the economic obstacles that must be overcome before broadband Internet service can be expanded to the unserved parts of the state and includes recommendations to help bring this about.

Florida TaxWatch supports the use of the \$366 million in federal Capital Project Funds to fund DEO’s Broadband Opportunity Grant Program. Florida TaxWatch also supports the use of the minimum \$100 million from the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to fund a program to guide the replacement of utility poles to accommodate a broadband provider’s attachment if replacement is necessary to meet applicable safety and engineering requirements.

As I close let me thank you for recognizing the need for broadband Internet expansion into the unserved parts of the state and for addressing this issue early in the session. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues on this and other difficult issues related to the pandemic and economic recovery.