

Rashid for Congress Last Mile Broadband Plan

The Problem

According to the Federal Communications Commission, 21.3 million Americans lack access to reliable broadband internet service (defined as 25Mbps download/3Mbps upload). Microsoft believes nearly half of the US population – 157.3 million Americans – do not use the internet at broadband speeds.

In rural Virginia, more than 25% of residents have no internet service providers at all, and about half have only one choice. In some First Congressional District Counties—such as Mathews, Middlesex, Caroline, Lancaster, New Kent, and King and Queen—more than 40% of residents lack access to the internet. Even where service is available, it's often slow and unreliable.

Parents in Virginia's First District have resorted to taking their kids to McDonald's parking lots, just to use their wifi to get homework done. Expectant mothers have to make a multi-hour drive from the Northern Neck to access healthcare options because they cannot access tele-health options at home. These are unacceptable scenarios. 21st Century business, education, and health care depend on a fast, reliable, and affordable internet connection.

Current Approach

Fourteen Federal Government agencies manage more than 40 grant and loan programs intended to expand broadband access to underserved parts of the US. They spend about \$4B a year to subsidize construction of new infrastructure and have so far paid more than \$22B in grants and subsidies to private telecommunications carriers. Despite this commitment of resources, access to broadband internet hasn't expanded much since 2013.

During his 12 years in Congress, Rob Wittman has done nothing to fix this—aside from talk about it. He did not propose a single legislative solution until this year and hasn't even previously supported passage of legislation that would fix this issue. When he finally took action in 2020, he proposed yet another grant program that would only add to an inefficient, bureaucratic, ad hoc system that doesn't work.

A Better Solution

The 2010 National Broadband Plan concluded that building out the US broadband infrastructure to bring access to every American would cost between \$20B and \$350B. Private companies won't make this investment, and government grants and other subsidies have not moved the needle. It's time to give local communities the power to create public broadband utilities.

More than 900 local communities have already acted, despite bureaucratic and other barriers, to create public broadband utilities. These barriers exist because corporate internet service providers lobby state and federal officials to protect them from competition. It's time to

empower local government and give them the authority to bring their constituents into the 21st Century internet economy.

In Virginia the law does not allow public providers to compete with private internet providers by offering less expensive service. It also forces public providers to meet procedural, financing, and reporting requirements that private companies do not. But we can fix this, in Virginia and across the US.

Our Proposal

We need to change the way we think about broadband internet access. In the 21st Century, broadband internet matters as much to daily life as electricity and clean water. Running a business or educating children depends on access to high-speed internet. More and more, access to quality health care depends on quality access to the internet as well, especially in rural areas. Internet access is not a luxury purchase – it's fundamental to the American economy, rural and urban. We need to make fast, reliable, and inexpensive internet access as common in American homes as electricity and indoor plumbing.

On my first day in office I would propose legislation to establish a Rural Broadband Expansion Authority and consolidate existing programs. This new Authority would bring together telecommunications, information technology, construction, education, and agricultural experts to assist local communities with the formation of effective and efficient broadband utilities. To make this work we need to take a page out of the Tennessee Valley Authority and use Federal investment to put Americans to work building out the broadband infrastructure.

In this way we can empower rural communities that wish to bring broadband internet access to their constituents by creating public utilities or cooperatives. This Rural Broadband Authority can repurpose existing grant programs to provide funding to municipalities and counties and make sure they have seed money they need to secure bonds, overcome barriers, and educate constituents. Enough government money has gone to corporations to subsidize rural internet infrastructure without appreciably expanding access. If corporate internet service providers won't build out the last mile of infrastructure, even with subsidies, it's time to let communities fill the gaps. *They* know where the gaps are.

Private corporations have a role to play in this project, but they haven't been getting it done. No one wants a government takeover of internet infrastructure, but the plain truth is that the corporations that provide this service in the US today take billions in Federal grants, subsidies, and tax breaks and still offer broadband at fractions of the speeds available to consumers in other countries. This is because governments in other countries have mandated a minimum service level and threatened to compete with them directly if they cannot make it happen. We need to do that in the US by empowering local communities to act.

Our program will leverage Federal investment more effectively, empower local communities to solve their own problems based on local needs, and give private providers an incentive to do

better. It's time to hit the connect button and make access to broadband internet in rural America happen once and for all.