

**Testimony of GrowSmart Maine in support of LD 1235, An Act To
Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue To Connect Maine with a World-
class Internet Infrastructure**

2021

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April 20, 2021

Senator Breen, Representative Pierce and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations & Financial Affairs, my name is Nancy Smith and I am the Executive Director of GrowSmart Maine. We are a statewide non-partisan organization working to create lasting prosperity without sacrificing the quality of life that defines Maine. We support policies, programs and projects that define and protect the value of our unique built and natural places while supporting long term economic opportunity.

As an active member of the Maine Broadband Coalition (MBC) GrowSmart Maine strongly supports this bond proposal. The following quote from the current ConnectMaine plan effectively describes the level of State action needed now:

“This Statewide Broadband Action Plan proposes that the state will contribute 25% of the total cost of the expansion needed for rural Maine. The remaining costs will come from the private sector, federal government and the local communities. To complete this program by 2025, we are recommending an investment of \$30 million dollars in FY20/21 and \$42.5 million in each of the next four years to be committed by the State of Maine. That would make the total State’s investment \$200 million over the next five years to reach the goal set forth in the State of Maine Strategic Plan. This total amount is less than half of what MDOT spends on the State highway and bridge system annually. Bringing high speed 4 connectivity to rural Maine is relatively cheap, given the economic payback, estimated to be at least a 4:1 return. It is also the critical infrastructure needed for Maine communities to attract new residents, increase workforce and education, and address climate change issues.”

With the significant funding coming to Maine through the federal American Rescue Plan Act, those essential federal and municipal dollars are coming to Maine, and private investment funds have consistently been part of the broadband solution. Especially at this critical time, significant state funding is needed to increase the overall financial resources available, but just as importantly, to demonstrate that Maine is willing to invest in itself.

And this is not solely a rural Maine priority. Neighborhoods in urban and suburban Maine also struggle with affordable access to high-speed internet. This state investment will allow additional flexibility to invest where it makes sense, even as we await final guidance on allowed uses of the ARPA funding.

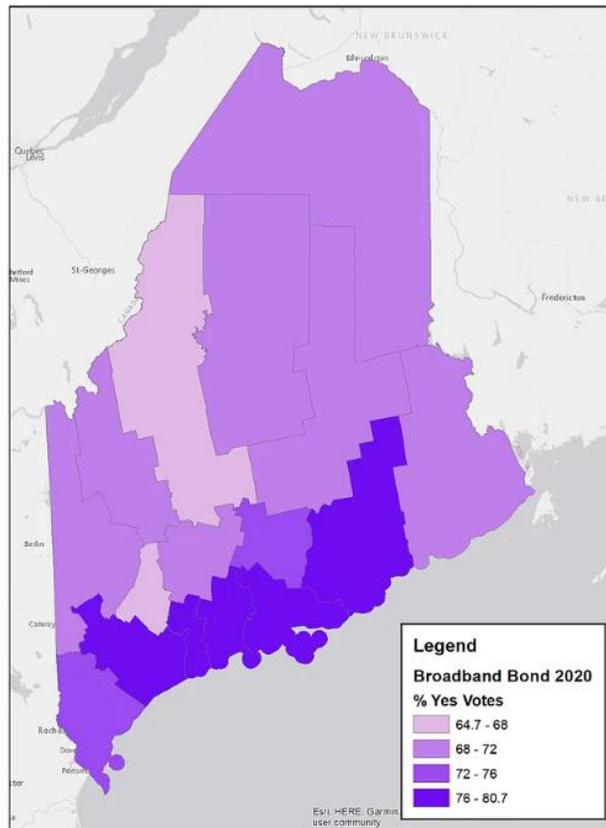
We support the stipulations in this bond proposal for open access and net neutrality to ensure equity for end users and sound investment of public dollars.

As we saw with the incredible support for last year’s \$15 million broadband bond, Mainers throughout the state understand the urgent need to extend broadband to every home and businesses, as is ConnectMaine’s charge, and are willing to ensure that State investment is part of the strategy.



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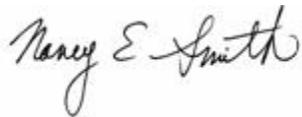


Affordable internet access does not guarantee a sustainable future, but the lack of it will stymie any other efforts to positively advance economic opportunities for all. As Maine’s statewide smart growth organization, GrowSmart Maine hosted a recent forum entitled [“More Broadband, Less Sprawl!”](#) in which we laid out the case for municipalities to deploy land use strategies that reward growth where it makes sense for both immediate and long term goals while working to extend broadband to Maine households and businesses.

Bringing internet access to existing homes and businesses increases the potential for new residential or commercial development far outside of a town or city center, be it a quiet village center, a vibrant historic downtown or the heart of a city. As outlined in our Community Guide [The Creeping Cost of Sprawl](#), the risks of this kind of growth can be significant for our economy and environment, municipal budgets, personal wellness and quality of life. GrowSmart is updating the data presented in this piece, yet the underlying premise remains valid - the incremental “creeping cost” of low-density development often goes unrecognized until it’s too late to reverse the damage.

The Maine Broadband Coalition is available as a resource and connection to Legislators as we all navigate the extraordinary challenges and opportunities ahead.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nancy E. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Nancy E Smith
Executive Director