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Testimony of Nancy Smith, Executive Director of GrowSmart Maine in support of LD 2134, “An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue for Infrastructure To Improve Transportation and Internet Connections”

March 11, 2020

Senator Breen, Representative Gattine 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 LD 2134, “An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue for Infrastructure To Improve Transportation and Internet Connections”. In stating our support for this important piece of legislation, we wish to emphasize that in our view, the two components of the bond proposal, a total of \$105 million to MaineDOT for transportation infrastructure and \$15 million to the ConnectMaine Authority for high-speed internet infrastructure for underserved parts of the state, are inextricably linked and are properly placed within the same bond legislation. **The concept of “connectivity”, so often cited in the need for adequate statewide internet service, applies equally to the need for improved transportation infrastructure which serves and connects all aspects of Maine's economy.**

With regards to the need for expanded internet services, the following quote from the current ConnectMaine plan more than adequately describes this crucial need: *“Most rural communities do not have access to viable high-speed connectivity. This limits their ability to develop a strong workforce, incubate innovation, create an environment to attract new residents and businesses, and support seniors and others to stay in their homes. Broadband access can also improve delivery and reduce costs of services including health care and education. As Maine works to address significant workforce challenges, universal access to high speed broadband will play a foundational role in building digital skills, attracting workforce and reducing inequality in our educational system. The private sector broadband investment model doesn’t work in rural Maine. The low population density and limited scale make it unprofitable for the private sector to expand their networks with private investment only.”*

To reiterate, many of the crucial factors which speak to the need for expanded internet connectivity also apply to the rationale for justifying a concerted effort to improve all aspects of Maine's transportation infrastructure. Access to a highly functional transportation infrastructure which effectively links all parts of the state goes hand-in-hand with the need for high-speed internet connectivity throughout the state.

Consideration should be given to all funding mechanisms for broadband and transportation infrastructure. A prosperous and sustainable Maine economy is dependent on both the connectivity of inter-state transportation infrastructure and the growing need for high-speed internet connectivity to underserved parts of the state.