



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of August 3, 2020 ~ 'A renewed blueprint for broadband development'

THOMAS F. O'MARA August 4, 2020

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While the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 brought action on this and many other critical issues to a standstill, this ongoing public health crisis has magnified the importance of the broadband challenge and the need for action as libraries and schools, local governments and organizations, hospitals and health care professionals, and communities at large, in countless ways, have turned to online discussions, meetings, programs and services to remain together and to carry out the necessary public outreach and response.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, "**A renewed blueprint for broadband development**"

In the fall of 2019, prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the Legislature's Commission on the Development of Rural Resources co-sponsored a joint Senate-Assembly hearing on broadband development.

It is an issue, and a challenge, that I have long advocated for and worked toward addressing. In 2015, for example, area Assemblyman Phil Palmesano and I sponsored a new law (Chapter 480 of the Laws of 2015) that, for the first time, included "installation and infrastructure of broadband services" as a specific project category eligible to receive funding through the Library Construction Grant Program. Prior to the law's enactment, libraries were unable to access funding through the popular grant program specifically for broadband purposes including cable, wiring and modems, and network terminals and access points.

Needless to say, if you didn't understand the fundamental importance of broadband development for public libraries and the communities they serve, we know it now. Over the past several months of the COVID-19 response, the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes public library systems have been absolute lifelines of online access and public outreach.

The 2019 hearing drew legislators representing rural regions across upstate New York to the Legislative Office Building in Albany to hear testimony from rural broadband stakeholders representing individual communities, businesses and industries, family farms, government agencies, schools and public libraries, health care providers, emergency services, law enforcement, and many others.

The above list of hearing participants, in and of itself, stands to highlight the fundamental importance of this challenge to the future.

Following the 2019 hearing, I said, "Access to high-speed Internet has become a fundamental need for our citizens, our businesses, our local economies, our first responders, our schools, and the overall success and strength of rural, local communities. We have worked to ensure that rural,

upstate New York not be left behind in this mission to bring effective broadband to all New Yorkers, but new initiatives and investments are needed. This hearing will serve to refocus the Legislature's attention and I look forward to working with my colleagues to get this job done. There are some incredible local efforts underway making great strides to expand and improve our regional access. Ongoing state investment can help accelerate these badly needed expansions and truly ensure that broadband development across rural, upstate New York receives an equal and fair commitment."

While the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 brought action on this and many other critical issues to a standstill, this ongoing public health crisis has magnified the importance of the broadband challenge and the need for action as libraries and schools, local governments and organizations, hospitals and health care professionals, and communities at large, in countless ways, have turned to online discussions, meetings, programs and services to remain together and to carry out the necessary public outreach and response.

The challenge, in short, is fundamentally critical to the communities I represent throughout the state's 58th Senate District encompassing all of Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben, and Yates counties, and a portion of Tompkins County (the City and Town of Ithaca, and the towns of Enfield, Newfield, and Ulysses).

Governor Cuomo shortchanged the Southern Tier and other Spectrum service areas when he required that the broadband build out be done by Spectrum at its expense in connection with his approval of the Time Warner/Charter merger. That precluded Spectrum in its territories of the state from receiving funding through the initial \$500-million New NY Broadband Program. So while state government has made important strides through the New NY Broadband Program and other past initiatives to bring high-speed broadband to rural areas, more (and broader and more urgent) steps will now need to be taken to accelerate this development. It must remain one of New York government's highest priorities, even moreso now given the likelihood of an increased reliance on remote learning during the COVID-19 response.

Toward this end, both houses of the State Legislature recently approved legislation that, if signed into law by Governor Andrew Cuomo, will direct the state Public Service Commission (PSC) to renew this focus on broadband expansion.

The PSC would examine the statewide accessibility, affordability and reliability of current high-speed Internet, which will be critically important in the aftermath of the COVID-19 response.

Regional public hearings would be held.

Finally, a report would be issued which could then serve as the renewed blueprint we need for action.

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