

Senator Pam Helming

Representing the 54th New York Senate District



IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 9, 2020
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Senator Helming Calls for Expanded Broadband Services

As legislative leaders, our immediate focus is on stopping the spread of the Coronavirus and saving lives. Everyday, we learn something new about this pandemic. This important information is passed along to our constituents through social media and other outlets. In addition, helpful information covering related topics- everything from how to apply for unemployment insurance to where to go for testing- is posted on websites. Being able to share this information via the internet allows us to communicate in real time. However, many of us live in areas where there are gaps in broadband coverage. In these areas, the health, safety and welfare of the citizens of this great state are in jeopardy.

While today we are focused on the Coronavirus, a lack of reliable broadband service has impeded all areas of life. Whether we are talking about connecting with health care providers and mental health professionals through telehealth services or the ability to receive timely notifications, including the state's public messaging regarding this pandemic, we must quickly expedite the expansion of broadband services. This is especially true in Seneca, Cayuga, Ontario and Wayne counties.

In 2018, we saw firsthand during the Seneca County flooding how a lack of internet service, coupled with spotty cellular service, hampered the coordination of rescue efforts. Thankfully, our first responders and local residents reacted quickly to ensure the safety of everyone involved.

With the implementation of PAUSE NY, all but essential businesses and our schools are closed. This means many people are working from home. It also means our educators and their students are working from remote locations. My office continues to hear from frustrated residents who are unable to work or learn from home due to a lack of broadband. This is putting individuals and communities at a great disadvantage. It is also putting an additional burden on local governments, school districts and employers.

For example, the Port Byron Central School District has been forced to send school buses with Wi-Fi capabilities to students' homes because they do not have access to the internet, which they need to complete coursework. Because of this innovative effort, students are able to download their work on their school-issued devices to complete throughout the week. While we are fortunate to have schools and businesses providing creative solutions to the lack of broadband during this time of crisis, this is not sustainable.

Continuing to expand broadband services is also important to our tourism industry which generates billions of dollars of revenue for our state. Visitors want and need to be connected. Studies have indicated visitors are more likely to stay in locations where broadband is available. We cannot afford to lose the tourist dollars that sustain our small businesses and are so vitally important to our communities.

In the area of economic development, communities that lack broadband are at a competitive disadvantage for recruiting new business opportunities and growing existing businesses. For our state's farmers, they must have

the ability to compete in a worldwide marketplace. In order to do this, they must have access to the real time information provided through reliable broadband.

Furthermore, as we immerse ourselves in a growing technological world, new state mandates and policies being pushed down on our local governments require reliable internet. Whether it is electronic voter signatures at the polls or most recently, government meetings being held remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, broadband is imperative for transparency and citizen participation.

As the Ranking Member of the Senate Committees on Commerce, Economic Development and Small Business; Parks, Recreation and Tourism and the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, I have heard numerous concerns regarding our state's broadband resources. I have shared my concerns with the Public Service Commission (PSC) and other state agencies. Working together with the PSC and our local municipalities, we have successfully expanded broadband services to many areas. However, this pandemic has highlighted the need to fill in the gaps that remain and I have called on the PSC to provide a time table for rolling out additional expansions on an expedited schedule and to prioritize our rural communities.

As always, if I can be of assistance to you on any matter related to our state government, please do not hesitate to let me know.