



Testimony to the Committee on Appropriations and Public Affairs

in support of

LD 1235, An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue To Connect Maine
with a World-class Internet Infrastructure

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Senator Breen, Representative Terry, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Public Affairs:

My name is Amy Winston and I am the State Policy Director at Coastal Enterprises, Inc (CEI). I reside in Edgecomb and am testifying today on behalf of CEI, and as a member of the Maine Broadband Coalition, in very strong support of LD 1235, “An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue To Connect Maine with a World-class Internet Infrastructure.”

CEI is a 43-year-old Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) specializing in financing for small businesses, natural resource-based industries, and downtown community revitalization projects with a mission of supporting good jobs, environmentally sustainable enterprises, and shared prosperity in Maine. We provide business advice and financing to approximately 2,000 entrepreneurs in Maine annually – and in 2020, our small business advisors and program staff worked with 3,000 businesses and individuals. Many of these partners and clients rely on reliable, high-speed broadband service to be competitive in their industry.

CEI strongly supports LD 1235, which proposes to ask Maine voters to approve a *\$100 million general fund bond* that will support *expansion of “world-class, affordable, high-speed Internet infrastructure” to 98% of Maine homes and businesses*. The [Maine Department of Economic and Community Development \(DECD\)’s 2018 Statewide Broadband Action Plan](#) estimates that *achieving this goal will require \$600 million in investment*. This is a critical time for the state to directly invest and leverage additional outside funding for this enormous endeavor. The proposed bond would substantially increase Maine’s investment in broadband development, expansion, and improvement in combination with funds anticipated in the American Rescue Plan Act. These funds will be administered by DECD and the ConnectMaine authority.

The state is at a critical juncture economically, culturally and with respect to broadband. Communities are realizing the importance of broadband access to attract, retain, and enable people to live and work in Maine. The state’s demographic and workforce challenges are well documented, and the 10-year Economic Plan prioritizes broadband as supporting infrastructure. Ubiquitous, and equitable, access to



reliable and affordable broadband is key to Maine's economic development strategy and to so many people, businesses, and communities banking on this strategy.

It is essential infrastructure; and, it is essential that *every part of the state* benefit from this investment, as it is critical to working, learning, job training, creating, and consuming, including critical services such as healthcare and education.

Economically, it is a lifeline, especially for rural communities, including students and employees who are dependent on broadband to study or work at home due to COVID-19. It is likely that remote education and work will continue after the pandemic as many employers develop new work culture and norms. Demographically, Maine's rural communities are generally older, and seniors with broadband access will benefit from telehealth, and related technologies, from both a cost and health perspective. As a "superdeterminant" of health, Broadband is integral to quality of life as well as quality of place.

Rural communities can't move from project planning to implementation and infrastructure installation without state investment. Interest rates are at historically low rates and eight out of 10 Mainers support state funding for broadband. Other states are also recognizing the importance of state level investment. For example, the Vermont legislature just passed a \$150M bond and Wisconsin is looking at an investment of \$150 million in addition to incoming federal funds.

We have advocated for broadband as essential infrastructure for over 5 years. The time is now. As heritage based economic pursuits such as farming, fishing and forestry, making and manufacturing are adapting and innovating to preserve and expand jobs, livelihoods and local economies, this critical investment will help move communities beyond needs assessments and plans to material infrastructure and actual, active connection.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for considering this testimony. We strongly encourage the committee to invest in Maine's future and pass LD 1235.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy Winston", written in a cursive style.

Amy Winston