February 28, 2022

Governor Mike DeWine
Riffe Center
77 South High Street, 30th Floor
Columbus, Ohio, 43215-6117

Dear Governor DeWine:

Over the past two decades, Ohio residents have learned of the decisive role that high-quality Internet plays in unlocking boundless education, healthcare, public safety, job creation, and economic opportunities. Reliable and affordable broadband can bring a world of information and promise within reach. Likewise, a lack thereof can have a generational impact on families and rippling effects on their communities.

With unprecedented funding available for broadband access and adoption, collaboration between state and local leadership is imperative. Tribal and local governments are uniquely positioned to seek on-the-ground solutions tailored to their community's needs. State support enables local leaders to make the best use of the myriad of resources available to help achieve ubiquitous connectivity.

By elevating residents' voices and fostering increased collaboration between state and local leaders, the Governor's Office could equip local officials with the key resources necessary for achieving their community's broadband ambitions. Congress' historic investment could provide the backbone for monumental state broadband strategies. We strongly encourage the inclusion of Tribal and local perspectives in Ohio's broadband and digital equity plans, ensuring maximum impact of this historic opportunity for decades into the future.

Next Century Cities supports community-based efforts to ensure that all residents have affordable, reliable, high-speed Internet access. We are a non-profit, nonpartisan organization born of the need to elevate community-level perspectives into broadband policymaking at every level of government.

Our organization is made up of more than 200 members in over 40 states, including Bexley, Canton, Columbus, Fairlawn, Granville, Hudson, Medina County, Shaker Heights, Yellow Springs, and Zanesville. The mayors and other local officials in our network have demonstrated expertise in expanding digital infrastructure and developing broadband adoption programs. Many have confronted those challenges in their hometowns, even without state and federal support.

Municipalities understand the far-reaching consequences when residents lack broadband access or cannot afford the subscription price. As Ohio drafts a roadmap to spend the influx of federal resources, those plans must support local efforts to generate connectivity solutions for themselves, particularly in counties like Highland and Coshocton, where there is little financial incentive for traditional providers to build infrastructure.

Incorporating local insights through transparent processes with staff dedicated to support ongoing collaboration could help the state meet the demands of a largely online workforce, increased telemedicine offerings, and schoolwork that requires a fast, resilient Internet connection. State tools that empower local participation can bring resource-strapped communities to the table to determine their path toward widespread connectivity.

Public-private partnerships, free WiFi connection points, and municipally managed infrastructure are only a handful of the innovative solutions that local governments have employed to ensure that every resident and business can access the wealth of benefits and essential services the Internet offers. Local leaders are also determined to paint a more granular picture of what service residents want and need, filling persistent information gaps.

Across Ohio, local governments are establishing inventive connectivity strategies. Communities like Hudson and Fairlawn built networks to fill connectivity gaps left by providers.[1] Now, they serve business and residential customers, offering transparent and consistent prices for high-speed service. Throughout the pandemic, their networks kept businesses and residents connected with the reliable broadband service needed to comply with shelter in place restrictions.

Medina County's open-access network now has 14 carriers directly connected to their open-access fiber, providing Internet and voice services. This network serves eight of the ten largest employers in the County.[2]

Dozens of other communities in Ohio use their own fiber networks for municipal purposes. They offer reliable internet access to government buildings and anchor institutions, support smart city applications that improve public safety and transportation, and provide the backhaul necessary to make public wireless networks available.

The State is distinctly positioned to bolster local access and adoption efforts, expanding initiatives' impact far beyond the strides that any single community can make on its own.

The need is expansive. The timeline is unforgiving. Local governments have made broadband equity a priority and will rely on ongoing partnerships with state leadership to effectuate lasting change.

Respectfully,

Next Century Cities

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[1] *See* Corian Zacher, *Next Century Cities' Members Oppose Proposals to Prohibit Municipal Broadband Options in Ohio* (June 21, 2021), https://nextcenturycities.org/ohiomunicipalbroadbandoptions/.
[2] *Id.*