

Memo Re H.710 for Educational and Community Connectivity -- 3/9/16
Rep. Cynthia Browning, Arlington
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As House Commerce and Economic Development works to get bills out I just want to circle back to update committee members concerning H.710. This bill is intended to accelerate our progress in achieving Vermont's goals to provide adequate telecommunications coverage across the state for community economic development and for equity in access to quality education. Based on my research at this point in time I would ask that the committee proceed with the allocation of \$ 1 million in bonded dollars to the Universal Service Fund for improvements of coverage – I think that this represents our best chance of fulfilling the longstanding promise of good coverage for all Vermonters. But I think that the School Connectivity Grant program for digital equipment is not ready to go this session.

(1) The part of the bill that adds \$1 million in bonded dollars from the Capital Bill to the existing Universal Service Fund is solid and ready to go. This additional funding can accelerate ongoing efforts by DPS to extend and improve internet connectivity speeds. From my perspective it could go into an Economic Development Bill or a Telecommunications Bill. [This would mean using Section 1, Section 3)a), & Section 4 of H.710]

- Jim Porter and Clay Purvis have told me that the lack of funds is all that is holding them back from accomplishing more of this work. They did not express any reservations about the language prioritizing schools and the communities surrounding schools when either or both have inadequate connectivity.**
- I have presented the bill to House Corrections & Institutions. Although there was no formal vote and the Committee has not yet begun the task of actually allocating funds, there is support for the general concept, and bonded dollars have been used for this purpose before. There are unallocated funds available this year due to the bond premium and projects that did not go forward as planned.**

(2) The part of the bill that establishes a Digital Equipment Education Grant for schools to use to obtain equipment is less well developed, and I think that it would better to ask for a proposal for such a program from the Agency of Education for next year rather than trying to go ahead with it now. Peter Drescher, the Education Technology Coordinator of AOE, has advised me that it would be most productive to link purchases of new software, hardware, or other equipment to some specific ongoing course or initiative. I think that it would be good to take more time to consider how best to set the framework and criteria of this grant program before trying to implement it. [This was in Section 2 and Section 3)b) of H.710]

Thanks!
Rep. Cynthia Browning