



**To:** Members of the Senate Finance Committee  
**From:** Karen Horn, Director, Public Policy and Advocacy, [khorn@vlct.org](mailto:khorn@vlct.org) [www.vlct.org](http://www.vlct.org)  
**Date:** April 18, 2019  
**Re:** H. 513, Broadband

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H. 513. This bill is a significant step in providing community groups the means and technical assistance to extend broadband to all Vermonters in areas that we now know the large service providers will not go.

**Vermont Context.** Local officials are very concerned that Vermont’s growth continues to stagnate outside of Chittenden County and our demographic is aging despite exciting things happening in cities and towns around the state. We are working hard at the local level and with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development to foster right-sized investment in our towns and villages. On March 27, VLCT hosted an Economic Development Forum at Burke Mountain Resort to help local officials build thriving local economies that generate revenue, attract new residents, create jobs, and build upon the unique attributes of each town. We had more than 100 attendees. Broadband and cell service were a significant part of the discussion that day.

**Need for High Speed Internet Access and Cell Coverage.** Growth – indeed maintaining the status quo – is unlikely in areas without broadband and cell infrastructure. This infrastructure should be treated in much the same way as other infrastructure (wastewater, stormwater management, water supply, electricity, land line telephones) – as a necessary component of keeping Vermonters connected to their government, to each other and the outside world, engaged in the economy, and safe in emergencies.

Local officials and community residents are ready to help themselves. Around the state we are seeing the kinds of grass roots approached anticipated in H. 513. EC Fiber, a communications union district, is building out high speed internet service to 24 towns. Central Vermont Fiber has sixteen member towns and is currently developing a plan for initial deployment according to their website. In Montgomery as part of the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) community visit, residents proposed the following action steps:

1. Educate [new cell and broadband] taskforce and residents about broadband/cell technology including existing service and options to address coverage and public safety concerns.
2. Look at grant options for public safety communications equipment (i.e. a satellite phone).
3. Explore all options for expanding service/coverage and decide which option to pursue.
4. Create signage indicating where current cell coverage exists (i.e. a cell phone booth downtown).
5. Coordinate communication with providers and congressional delegation.



6. Conduct feasibility study to improve service or build new cell tower.
7. Coordinate actions to ensure that fiber could be integrated into any underground utility project.
8. Explore new telemedicine/distance learning options and funding to increase student access at home.
9. Consider building Wi-Fi hotspot for downtown.

Towns cannot be successful in these endeavors on their own. We strongly support H. 513 and the funding provided to support a rural broadband technical assistance specialist and development of a toolkit highlighting effective models to help community groups be successful in extending service to their neighbors.

**Support for H. 513** We support the requirement for the Connectivity Initiative to prove internet service capable of speeds of at least 25 Mbps download and 3Mbps upload.

The Broadband Innovation Grant Program (\$700,000), Connectivity Initiative grants (\$205,000) and Broadband Expansion Loan Program (loans up to \$1.8 million not exceeding a total appropriation of \$8.5 million) are absolutely essential components of a successful program to extend broadband service to our underserved areas. If those funds are not administered by the Public Service Department as is contemplated in the House passed version of H. 513, we recommend that they be administered by the Department of Housing and Community Development, which has longstanding experience with grants and loans provided to municipalities for community improvement projects.

We also agree that the option of working with electric utilities to extend broadband service using their infrastructure is an innovative concept that could produce real results sooner rather than later.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.