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The Honorable Bryce Edgmon
Alaska State Legislature
120 4th St., State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: In support of HB363

Dear Representative Edgmon,

Thank you for your sponsorship of HB363, establishing the office of broadband, creating the broadband parity adjustment fund, and establishing the Statewide Broadband Advisory Board.

Having served on the Governor's Task Force on Broadband this last year, alongside leaders from around the state, I know how timely and important this issue is. The Task Force put a great deal of effort into its work and final report; it is gratifying to see it reflected in this piece of legislation. I was personally involved in the policy working group and the three actions of HB363 encapsulates the vast majority of this work – statewide coordination, meaningful input into decision-making processes, and methods to address both infrastructure buildout and affordability for Alaskans.

AML supports this legislation as drafted. It provides sufficient guidance to the State and necessary authorities without overcomplicating the process with minutiae. We recognize that this legislation is a critical and necessary first step along a long road to be able to fully meet Alaska's broadband needs. In future years there will need to be additional actions, potentially, but these will emerge once the State has sufficient building blocks in place, and as federal investment becomes clearer. The list of recommendations from the Task Force should be considered part of a roadmap, which HB363 enables. We don't have to solve for everything right away, but be patient and responsive as needs and opportunity arise.

I have attached a summary of observations that AML produced at the conclusion of the Task Force's work. I think you'll find that they mirror the sentiment expressed thus far, and that HB363 provides the tools with which the State can serve to deliver beneficial outcomes to Alaskans for years to come.

Respectfully,

Nils Andreassen
Executive Director

Summary from AML's Perspective

Assessing New Technologies

We heard from stakeholders about the likelihood and reality that satellite technologies may provide timely broadband solutions to remote communities. LEO and GEO efforts are critical components of a broadband strategy and the State will benefit from an approach that is mindful of how and when these may be best deployed, and by whom. While this final report has tried to stay technology neutral, it has also said that fiber is a gold standard. If that's the case, then the State's approach to an infrastructure backbone should rest on a long-term effort to implement fiber. By no means does that preclude parallel efforts that addresses the immediate needs of communities, and the report's recommendations provide for ways in which both fiber and newer technologies can meet Alaska's needs. The Task Force has been cognizant of and wrestled with how to deploy limited resources, and ultimately the criteria for project development allows a wide range of choices. We expect that the State's Office of Broadband Deployment will stay fully apprised of technological advancements and can weigh those alongside the priorities outlined herein.

Timing

Part of the conflict in decision-making, relative to fiber and LEO/GEO, is timing. Alaskans are right to want immediate relief from poor broadband service and high costs. Building out a fiber backbone – thinking long-term – is a long-term prospect. This strategy is one that then allows future investment to be maximized; it's a process that builds on project efforts sequentially, lowering costs and improving quality along the way. The time that takes, however, means that communities who don't benefit immediately may feel left behind or out. That's an important reason the Task Force recommended a Parity Adjustment, such that relief still comes to those in need. The State's aren't the only efforts that will make a difference – making a difference will mean a team approach.

Enhancing Partnership and Engagement

The Task Force has recommended the implementation of an Office of Broadband Deployment, and the creation of Regional Broadband Advisory Committees. There are a number of things to note that are worth consideration. The Task Force has assigned to the Office a very long list of responsibilities – it is not imagined that all of these are taken up at once, nor that they can all be accomplished immediately. In fact, the Office will need to take its time to establish its capacity, capability, and competency.

Therefore, it likely requires a stepwise approach that means the Office can tackle the immediate and necessary while building toward the long-term and sustainable. Regional Broadband Advisory Committees are the Task Force's answer to the inclusivity necessary and requested by Alaskans. This is where local governments and Tribes have a seat at the table to be part of broadband deployment in Alaska. These are necessary and integral mechanisms for ensuring that partnership occurs. We expect that by implementing both a strong State Office dedicated to broadband oversight, and regional planning bodies, the State will be in a position

to address challenges on the front-end of a project and strategy, rather than face hurdles later on.

Pricing and Affordability

The Task Force included affordability as a criteria and goal of State broadband deployment – it's a driving factor in both the quality of service that Alaskans deserve and a springboard to economic development. The step not taken was to recommend specific ways to address pricing that consumers experience. There were a number of proposals considered, from price gouging legislation to a net profits tax, to changes within the Regulatory Council of Alaska. Ultimately, these were felt outside the scope of the Task Force and will need to be addressed by legislative or regulatory action. The considerations, though, or calls for improvement, are important to highlight. Many have argued that the scale of public investment into what will be private infrastructure should be coupled with public oversight over the difference that makes to the consumer. The way in which the Task Force addressed this was through the capacity and responsibilities of the Office of Broadband Deployment. That Office will have 1) data and 2) measurable outcomes from its project deployment, vetting of project applications, and overall mapping and information acquisition. In many ways, the State should have insight into price and affordability in ways that it hasn't before. This may foster an opportunity for different policy decisions in the future. Ultimately, the Task Force's recommendations provide a strong platform for oversight in the public interest. One of the fundamental principles with which the Task Force has approached broadband deployment is equity, and efforts by the State should and will include that as a priority.

Accessibility

With broadband speeds, affordability, and reliability all being critical aspects of building out Alaska's broadband infrastructure, equitable access to broadband once it is available in a given location is often overlooked. This can be thought of at both a macro and micro level – communities just beyond the build out, or neighborhoods on the outskirts or even within densely populated areas; availability of broadband at speeds and a price that are meaningful and affordable to consumers cannot be left out of State planning efforts and action. Impediments to quality service can be both circumstantial – trespass on a neighbor's property – or systemic – inadequate resources and competing priorities result in delays to build out. Alaskans experience this in different ways, where during COVID-19 pandemic schools were closed and internet access was available in the parking lot, or in daily life for remote schools, businesses, tribes, local governments, and health clinics, where participation in activities is hampered by access that is out of reach. Alaska's broadband strategy includes, and the Task Force wants to highlight, pathways to addressing this patchwork of coverage. Equity in broadband services being offered will ensure that Alaska has villages, towns and neighborhoods similar to that of their peers. An equitable strategy will be Alaska-driven and in the public interest, leveraging federal investment and private partnerships but maintaining local control, the State's priorities, and the public's well-being. Broadband access is an important part of modern Alaska's infrastructure needs.