

## **WHAT IS BROADBAND?**

The PA State Grange position is as follows: *“The Grange advocates parity in Broadband access for rural areas generally and specifically for rural schools”*. (2016)  
It sounds good and the media uses the term but what is it really talking about?

Broadband is shorthand for a range of computer and digital resources where some rural areas do not have the same access as suburbs and cities. It can mean not being able to use a cell phone or a smart phone. It means no real access to computers, no Wi-Fi, and no real electronic ability to do business in today’s connected world. Please note a report from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) released August 10, 2016, entitled ‘The State of the Urban/Rural Digital Divide’. Its’ highlights:

- “In spite of advances in both policy and technology, the barriers to Internet adoption existing in rural communities are complex and stubborn.”
- 69 percent of rural residents reported using the Internet versus 75 percent of non-rural residents.

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## **EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY**

How can our kids become the agronomists, scientists, and biologists of tomorrow when they are not able to learn today? A teacher may be excellent and the school may have wonderful laboratory equipment but what if the student is unable to use a computer at home? Will they be able to do well in today’s technological world if they have not mastered the basic tools they need? In addition, how can they study or do research? It is like having rural students entering college or the workforce with English as their second language. These days, technology is too often the first language and suburban and urban pupils know it. Rural kids may not. Kids from rural Pennsylvania who do not have equal access to technology unfortunately will not have equal opportunities to excel.

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## **AN UNLEVEL PLAYING FIELD**

Rural economic development means jobs but what new businesses will choose to locate in an area where they do not have access to Broadband resources? It is like a trucking firm locating in an area with gravel roads. Commercial success in rural areas means access to the basic tools of commerce. What are these tools? Access to raw materials such as food products is a vital resource for value-added food manufacturers and thankfully, rural areas have that. But what if the business cannot compete in getting orders from grocery chains because they are hindered by lack of communications? Can a rural factory secure international orders since we live in a global, connected, market? Existing businesses in rural PA compete with suburban and urban concerns and with other businesses in the United States and the world. Why should they stay where they are if they cannot compete?

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## **CONTINUED PRINT PUBLICATION OF LEGAL NOTICES**

Since rural Pennsylvania does not have the same Broadband access as other areas, a legislative proposal to say that legal notices have to be posted electronically and not published in print publications as they do now. PA State Grange thinks that is a terrible idea since many rural residents get their news from real print newspapers. Often, it is not a matter of preference if they do not have access to the Internet. This is clearly something to be discussed.

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## **CONTINUED ACCESS TO TELEPHONES**

Aren't telephones a necessity? In addition to business, phones are essential for family to family communication. They are essential to the elderly so that they can reach the outside world or for getting medical assistance if they are disabled and housebound. When it comes to medical care, rural areas do not have the same medical choices as everybody else. There are fewer primary care providers and fewer places where people can get treatment. The current buzzword is telemedicine where rural residents can receive health care over the phone and over the Internet. Legislation promoting this is supported by the PA State Grange (Senate Bill 780 sponsored by Senator Elder Vogel from Beaver County and House Bill 1648 sponsored by Bucks County Rep. Marguerite Quinn). Problem is, without Broadband access, these same rural areas will still not have access to the full range of medical resources.

Here is the problem. Utilities have embraced new technology, making traditional land-line telephones more expensive (to them) to have. If utilities pull the proverbial plug, what does that do to rural Pennsylvanians who would no longer have land-line telephones? They do not have equal access to smart or cell phones. Thankfully, there is a short-term solution. PA has a special fund called the PA Universal Service Fund which helps subsidize the extra costs borne by utilities in keeping land-line access. Senator Ryan Aument from Lancaster County introduced Senate Bill 740 which keeps this support of land-line telephones until December 31, 2021. Hopefully by then, rural areas will have caught up technologically and have parity with suburban and rural areas. PA State Grange supports Senate Bill 740.

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