

U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Joins bipartisan group urging continued broadband deployment in rural communities

Posted on Monday, Apr 17, 2017

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin, a member of the bipartisan Senate Broadband Caucus, joined a group of 56 Senators in urging the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to continue advancing broadband deployment in rural communities. In a letter to Chairman Pai, Commissioner O’Rielly and Commissioner Clyburn, the Senators expressed concerns about the high cost of these critical services in many rural communities and stressed that more Americans should have the opportunity to purchase affordable broadband to keep them connected.

“We appreciate the steps taken by the FCC last year to address this concern. However, we are still hearing frustration about the prices for and the availability of standalone broadband. Many operators remain unable or unwilling to offer such broadband because their prices would still be unreasonably high even after the reforms. Other operators may offer standalone broadband, but the costs they are forced to recover from rural consumers far exceed what urban consumers would pay for the same service,” the senators wrote in a letter led by U.S. Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Deb Fischer (R-NE).

As a member of the Senate Commerce Committee, Senator Baldwin has made it a priority to expand and improve communications infrastructure in rural areas of

Wisconsin:

- In January, Baldwin joined a [bipartisan group of senators in urging President Trump to include broadband in any infrastructure initiative](#).
- In February, Baldwin joined a bipartisan group of Senators in sending a [letter to the new FCC Chairman Ajit Pai](#) asking him to prioritize mobile broadband deployment in rural and underserved areas.
- In March, Baldwin hosted a rural broadband roundtable in Eagle River with local community leaders and broadband advocates on broadband expansion, adoption and utilization in rural Wisconsin.

In addition to Senators Baldwin, Klobuchar and Fischer, the letter was also signed by Senators John Thune (R-SD), Roy Blunt (R-MO), Thom Tillis (R-NC), Jerry Moran (R-KS), Orrin Hatch (R-UT), Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Roger Wicker (R-MS), Joe Manchin (D-WV), Richard Burr (R-NC), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Claire McCaskill (D-MO), John Cornyn (R-TX), James Lankford (R-OK), Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV), Al Franken (D-MN), Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND), Joe Donnelly (D-IN), Michael Bennet (D-CO), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Ron Wyden (D-OR), Johnny Isakson (R-GA), Pat Roberts (R-PA), Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), John Barrasso (R-WY), Todd Young (R-IN), Tim Kaine (D-VA), Dick Durbin (D-IL), Tom Cotton (R-AR), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Steve Daines (R-MT), Cory Gardner (R-CO), Mike Rounds (R-SD), Angus King (I-ME), Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Rob Portman (R-OH), Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Jon Tester (D-MT), John Boozman (R-AR), Chuck Grassley (R-IA), Bob Casey (D-PA), Bill Cassidy (R-LA), John Hoeven (R-ND), Gary Peters (D-MI), James Inhofe (R-OK), Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), Mike Crapo (R-ID), John McCain (R-AZ), Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Tim Scott (R-SC), Ben Sasse (R-NE), and Mike Enzi (R-WY).

The full text of the letter is below:

“Dear Chairman Pai, Commissioner O’Rielly, and Commissioner Clyburn:

We write to encourage the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to continue working to advance broadband deployment in high-cost rural areas to give rural Americans the opportunity to obtain affordable broadband.

Congress has expressed broad support for modernizing the federal Universal Service Fund (USF) toward this goal. On May 6, 2014, 133 Members of Congress -44 Senators and 89 House Members - signed bipartisan letters calling on the FCC to

make tailored modifications to USF support for the delivery of broadband services to consumers in high-cost areas of the United States served by small, rural rate-of-return-regulated local exchange carriers. Similar letters were sent in May 2015 by more than 176 Members of Congress, including 61 Senators and 115 House Members.

The shared concern expressed in those letters was that rural consumers who wished to “cut the cord” on traditional voice “plain old telephone service” (POTS) and opt instead to obtain only fixed broadband services could not do so. As those letters noted, the FCC’s old rules unfortunately tied USF support to a consumer’s purchase of POTS, making it impossible for millions of rural consumers to obtain affordable “standalone broadband ” without buying traditional telephone service as well.

We appreciate the steps taken by the FCC last year to address this concern. However, we are still hearing frustration about the prices for and the availability of standalone broadband. Many operators remain unable or unwilling to offer such broadband because their prices would still be unreasonably high even after the reforms. Other operators may offer standalone broadband, but the costs they are forced to recover from rural consumers far exceed what urban consumers would pay for the same service.

All this means that, despite the reforms last year, millions of rural consumers are still not seeing widespread affordable standalone broadband services due to insufficient US support. Meanwhile, the limited USF budget also reduced the amount of funding available to carriers electing new “model-based” USF support, resulting in tens of thousands of rural consumers receiving slower broadband speeds than intended by the model or not gaining access to broadband at all.

We are concerned that the lack of sufficient resources in the reformed High-Cost mechanism may be undermining the desired effect of the reforms and falling short of the statutory mandate that reasonably comparable services at reasonably comparable rates be available to rural and urban-Americans alike. We therefore encourage you to consider any changes to the High-Cost mechanism that may be necessary to ensure it can achieve the goal of making affordable broadband available to Americans in high-cost rural areas.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure rural American consumers and businesses have access to quality,

affordable broadband.”