

FRANKLIN COUNTY DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION

June 16, 2021

Representative Scott Oelslager
77 S. High Street, 13th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Representative Plummer
77 S. High Street, 13th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Representative Erica Crawley
77 S. High Street, 10th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Senator Matt Dolan
1 Capitol Square, 1st Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Senator Teresa Gavarone
1 Capitol Square, 2nd Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Senator Vernon Sykes
1 Capitol Square, Ground Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Dear Members of the State Operating Budget Conference Committee:

We, the undersigned, write to express our fervent opposition to the inclusion of amendment SC4546-1 in the state budget bill, which would effectively reverse the substantial progress our coalition of more than 30 members has made in closing Franklin County's digital divide over the past year. If enacted, the language included in the Omnibus Amendment would prevent communities like ours from implementing much needed initiatives and public-private partnerships to enhance broadband access and affordability. **Our coalition urges you to strike amendment SC4546-1 from the state budget bill and reinstate the \$190 million the House version of the operating budget allocated for broadband adoption.**

As we saw first-hand during the COVID-19 shutdown, the digital divide plagues Ohio. In Franklin County alone, over 100,000 households (20 percent of total households) were without the technology and tools necessary to weather the pandemic and fully participate in remote learning, remote work, and telehealth, disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable members of our community, including low-income and minority populations.

At a time when reliable broadband is imperative, and when an unprecedented amount of federal dollars are available to enhance access to it, this amendment language will have a significant impact on our ability to help address our local broadband needs. As a result of COVID19 and the desperate need for affordable broadband in the community, we came together to form a coalition and began two pilots in underserved neighborhoods. Both pilots are targeting a minimum 100 households with 50 Mbps service for low or no cost to households. While these programs are temporary in nature, they are providing affordable options for households that previously lacked service at a time when it is most needed for access to school, healthcare, and jobs. We are not competing with internet service providers, as there are plenty of providers in these neighborhoods currently, but they aren't offering the type of product that makes broadband affordable for low-income households.

Moreover, the amendment's funding restrictions do not promote nor allow for innovative and unique community-led solutions addressing broadband access like these pilots. Restricting municipalities from providing an essential service will lead to reduced opportunities for educational advancement; will weaken community economic development efforts; and does not align with the intent of House Bill 2, nor Ohio's Broadband Strategy, both of which aimed to create new opportunities to expand broadband access and adoption to all Ohioans. The state should encourage these types of solutions, yet the amendment requires only capital funds be utilized by political subdivisions to fund broadband expansion projects. The new budget language prevents local governments from taking their digital futures into their

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own hands. These are fundamentally local decisions that should be made at the community level, through the processes that local leaders ordinarily use for making comparable decisions.

The proposed language would also thwart our plans to leverage federal funds to address the county's digital divide, despite those dollars being intended for broadband deployment, broadband adoption, and digital inclusion efforts. The language limits a political subdivision's ability to leverage federal funds for the construction, deployment, purchase, lease, or operation of broadband facilities despite the explicit U.S. Treasury guidance that includes broadband deployment, internet access, and digital literacy activities as eligible expenses. Limiting funding language may prevent reasonable projects from advancing and is contrary to the ideals of working to expand access.

Additionally, we seek your support for reinstating the \$190 million in the House version of the operating budget for broadband adoption. The \$20 million provided by House Bill 2, while a significant start, is insufficient to fully address Ohio's digital divide. In fact, following an informal request by BroadbandOhio, more than \$250 million worth of potential projects were identified to bring broadband service to Ohioans who currently do not have service. Without additional funding, this need will continue to grow. Reinstating the dollars for the Residential Broadband Expansion Program will put Ohio on track as it continues to close the broadband gap across the state.

For these reasons and more, we urge you to oppose amendment SC4546-1 and reinstate the \$190 million allocated for broadband adoption efforts. Our community's experience with COVID-19 and its profound impacts on our lives have removed any reasonable doubts about the need for prompt and vigorous action by both the private and the public sectors. The Ohio legislature should reject the proposed amendments and any other counterproductive measures that may be introduced to replace them.

Sincerely,

The Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition Steering Committee



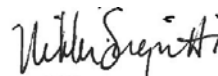
Patrick Losinski, CEO
Columbus Metropolitan Library



Douglas Kridler, President
The Columbus Foundation



William Murdock, Executive Director
Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission



Nikki Scarpitti, Steering Committee Co-Chair
Director, Strategic Initiatives & Advocacy
Columbus Metropolitan Library



Aaron Schill, Steering Committee Co-Chair
Director, Data and Mapping
Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission



Christie Angel, President & CEO
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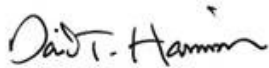
Sam Orth, Director of Technology
City of Columbus



Angela Siefer, President & CEO
National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)



Mark Patton, Vice President
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