Resolution for Public Internet Option in Whatcom County

WHEREAS, broadband internet is now an essential utility, like electricity, and should be legally classified as a public utility;

WHEREAS, educators and students at every level need access to affordable high-speed internet to support equitable educational outcomes;

WHEREAS, affordable high speed fiber optic service is essential to create, compete for, and retain businesses of every size – and living-wage jobs – in Whatcom County;

WHEREAS, having a 1 gigabit per second (Gbps) symmetrical upload and download option should be available to all business and residential customers, with latency (the time it takes for data to be transferred between its original source and its destination) no greater than 50 milliseconds;

WHEREAS, according to the Federal Communications Commission, only 6% of Whatcom County residents have access to 1 Gbps internet and, of these, almost all only have one available provider of 1 Gbps internet. This is below the 9% of Washington residents who have access to 1 Gbps internet.[1]

WHEREAS, only fiber optic technology can deliver such capability;

WHEREAS, 5G (5th Generation) wireless technology works only over a small radius, and therefore relies on a fiber optic backbone, and is therefore a necessary complement rather than an alternative to fiber optic service. [2]

WHEREAS, internet service is a *natural monopoly*, a type of monopoly that arises where high start-up costs and major economies of scale lead to only one firm being able to efficiently provide service in a certain territory. A good example of this is in the business of electricity transmission where once a grid is set up to deliver electric power to all of the homes in a community, putting in a second, redundant grid to compete makes little sense;

WHEREAS, for-profit monopolies, duopolies, and oligopolies hinder free competitive markets and generally fail to deliver quality and/or equitable service at competitive and affordable prices, constituting a *market failure*;

WHEREAS, according to *The Cost of Connectivity 2020*, "The lack of competition exacerbates the digital divide—not just between urban and rural communities, but also between households that can afford a home internet connection and those that cannot. Study after study has found that cost remains one of the biggest barriers to internet adoption. Without robust competition, prices tend to increase. Households increasingly rely on the internet for school, work, community, job opportunities, medical care, access to social safety net benefits, and so much more—and navigating the new realities of the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified this dynamic and laid bare the impact of the digital divide." [3]

WHEREAS, in 2019, the average monthly price for internet service including equipment rental fees in the U.S. is about $85, as opposed to $47 in Europe; and South Korea has the highest fiber penetration rate of any country, over 80%, yet it also has the lowest average monthly cost, around $30 a month;[4]

WHEREAS, the Washington State Legislature this year authorized local government entities to offer broadband services directly to the public;

WHEREAS, Anacortes in neighboring Skagit County offers public 1 Gbps fiber optic service directly to residents at $69/month, and 100 Mbps service at $39/month;[5]

WHEREAS, Jefferson County Public Utility District (PUD) on the Olympic Peninsula is developing a fiber optic network, and recently voted to offer a minimum of 100 Mbps up to 1 Gbps public fiber optic service directly to residents at an estimated $65/month cost on a month-to-month basis (no contract);[6]

WHEREAS, the primary purpose of Washington State port districts is economic development, and fiber optic broadband internet service is essential to that function;

WHEREAS, public utility districts, established in 1930 by Washington State voters through Initiative 1, are not-for-profit, community-owned utilities that provide electric, water, sewer, and telecommunications services, governed by locally-elected Commissioners;

WHEREAS, Grant County PUD and Douglas County PUD provide 100% fiber optic connectivity to their customer members;

WHEREAS, in 2020 the Bellingham City Council established a Broadband Advisory Workgroup to explore public fiber as a tool to promote equity, accessibility, and affordability of high-speed internet service to the public;

WHEREAS, the Port of Bellingham and the Whatcom PUD have formed a joint committee to work on internet collaboration, with Commissioner Michael Shepard from the Port and Commissioner Christine Grant from the PUD;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that Whatcom Democrats call on the Whatcom County Council and County Executive, the Port of Bellingham, the Whatcom County Public Utility District (PUD), the Bellingham City Council and Mayor, and other Whatcom city councils and mayors immediately to:

- Develop a publicly-owned fiber optic backbone connecting every part of our county and cities, with Dig Once policies, interlocal agreements (multi-jurisdictional memoranda of understanding), and open access policies that preclude private monopolization of the market and preference local businesses and public providers; *and*
- Retain the legal and contractual rights and responsibilities of local governments to directly provide internet service to constituents; *and*
- Offer *public option* 1Gbps symmetrical fiber optic retail services with no more than 50 millisecond latency direct to residential and business customers at reduced prices and installation fees comparable to Anacortes and Jefferson County; *and*
- Hire experts in public internet policy and technology to enact the preceding mandates.

THEREFORE, BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that Whatcom Democrats call on the Federal Communications Commission to reclassify the Internet under its regulatory guidelines from the current position as a Title I “information service” to a Title II “telecommunication service” – essentially, a public utility. If necessary, we call on the U.S. Congress to mandate that designation.

Adopted by unanimous vote (53 to 0) of Whatcom Democrats (Whatcom County Democratic Central Committee) on August 28, 2021.

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[1] Federal Communications Commission. *Fixed Broadband Deployment.* "Whatcom County."

https://broadbandmap.fcc.gov/#/area-summary?version=jun2020&type=county&geoid=53073&tech=acfosw&speed=25_3&vlat=48.814416910761366&vlon=-121.98904849999997&vzoom=8.132251507400081

[2]

Susan Crawford, *Fiber: The Coming Tech Revolution—and Why America Might Miss It* (Yale University Press 2018), 59, 65-66: "at higher frequencies, in the gigahertz or billions-per- second range, the wavelengths get astonishingly short—close to a millimeter in the 28 gigahertz (GHz) range that is used for 5G communications. Those very short waves have trouble carrying information over anything more than very short distances, particularly when they are sent out using low-power transmissions (as Wi Fi currently is). In engineering jargon, very-high-frequency radio waves "attenuate" extremely rapidly, so to take advantage of their high communications capacity you have to be very close to the hot spot (the device connected to a wire that is sending and receiving wireless communications)—no more than a few hundred feet, for example, for transmissions in the 28 GHz range.

At very high frequencies, transmissions can also be easily disrupted—the jargon for this is "interference." Walls, buildings, rain, leaves, and people can all get in the way of a millimeter-wave transmission." …

The question "Who needs fiber when the future is wireless?" merits a similarly snappy response. Fiber is complementary to wireless. They do not substitute for one another. In order to work, very-high-capacity wireless connections – 5G – require fiber to run deep into neighborhoods and buildings, and future wireless networks will look like present-day Wi-Fi in their architecture: relatively small areas, each attached to fiber."

[3] https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/cost-connectivity-2020/introduction

[4] https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/cost-connectivity-2020/global-findings

[5] https://washingtonstatewire.com/advice-on-public-broadband-from-anacortes-was-first-municipal-provider/; https://www.anacorteswa.gov/984/Access---Anacortes-Fiber-Internet

[6] https://www.peninsuladailynews.com/news/jefferson-county-pud-seeks-to-expand-internet/; https://www.jeffpud.org/broadband-phase-1/