



## Ohio legislature considers expansion of broadband service for underserved areas

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Internet access has become a vital part of our everyday way of life. The ability to access the internet is critical for job searching, conducting government business, shopping, accessing important medical and financial information, and all levels of education. However, there are approximately 2.5 million Ohioans who lack access to reliable broadband service. In addition, nearly 90,000 businesses in Ohio do not have access to broadband internet. A recent Ohio State University study indicates that these underserved populations largely live in less populated rural regions where it is cost-prohibitive for internet service providers to extend service.

Bi-partisan legislation has been introduced in the Ohio Senate and the Ohio House of Representatives to address this issue by substantially expanding broadband access to underserved areas of the state. Senate Bill 225 (Eklund (R-Munson Township) and Schiavoni (D-Boardman)) and companion House Bill 378 (Smith (R-Bidwell) and Cera (D-Bellaire)) seek to create a Broadband Infrastructure Grant Program, which would provide \$50 million per year in grant funding for a period of two years. The program would use existing funding from Ohio Third Frontier bond revenue.

If the Broadband Infrastructure Grant Program is passed, the Ohio Development Services Agency (DSA) would award grants of up to \$5 million to businesses, nonprofits, co-ops and/or political subdivisions to build broadband infrastructure in underserved areas of the state. Grants would be awarded based on applications that best address community needs, including technical support and digital literacy training, with an emphasis on vital community anchor institutions. In addition, \$1 million would be available to support broadband data collection, mapping and local broadband planning efforts to target infrastructure investments.

The broadband expansion legislation may be successful considering its bi-partisan support. Further, the legislation is modeled after Minnesota's Border-to-Border Broadband Grant Program, which has been viewed as a success in expanding internet access to rural populations. As such, local officials, residents and businesses that are located in Ohio's underserved communities should monitor Ohio's legislative efforts to expand broadband service and stay informed regarding the potential grant funding opportunities in the future.

# Authors

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**Devin D. Parram**

Partner

Columbus

614.227. 8813

[dparram@bricker.com](mailto:dparram@bricker.com)