Wicker’s Broadband Proposal Protects Funds and Speeds Up Expansion

By Public Service Commissioner Brandon Presley

Regrettably, it’s a rare thing these day for the member of one political party to brag on a member of the other political party. But, I have always believed that credit should be given for good public policy regardless of the author’s political party. That’s why this populist, FDR, New Deal Democrat wants to thank our Republican, senior U.S. Senator Roger Wicker for working with me and others to advance federal broadband funding in a manner that gets the money out the door and protects every penny of federal money. Mississippi is lucky to have Senator Wicker as! Chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee at a time when rural broadband access is at the forefront of public debate. He has stepped up to the bat and I, for one, want him to know that it is appreciated.

A few weeks ago, Senator Wicker authored a common-sense, balanced approach to broadband expansion that I not only endorse as a Mississippi Public Service Commissioner, but also as the President of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) in its current form for those reasons. Senator Wicker’s Accelerating Broadband Connectivity (ABC) Act of 2020 is a well-reasoned, aggressive way to incentivize the expansion of broadband service to disconnected citizens in a responsible manner. I am proud to fully endorse this bill and hope that the Congress pass it, as is, sooner rather than later.

Senator Wicker’s bill not only incentivizes companies to complete their broadband project buildouts on a faster timeline, but also protects these precious dollars from waste, fraud, and abuse by leaving intact the vital relationship between state regulators and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to make sure that those who are receiving these funds actually spend them on the project, do not submit fraudulent claims of service, or waste funds. With federal dollars scarce, that is of major importance.
In my time as Public Service Commissioner, I have seen firsthand examples of companies using the idea of giving away cell phones to falsely make claims so that they could steal from the FCC program. Make no mistake about it, there are companies that relish the idea of loose rules and little oversight of these funds. Senator Wicker’s “ABC Act of 2020” does exactly what needs to be done at this stage of the broadband expansion movement in Congress while keeping regulators at the state level “on the beat” to protect federal dollars from being fraudulently stolen.

As someone who has worked for broadband expansion for years, I can truthfully tell you that Senator Wicker’s approach is exactly what Mississippi and America needs at this time. Broadband expansion should be accelerated at the fastest rate possible without inviting waste, fraud, and abuse. Every dollar stolen or wasted by an unscrupulous telecommunications company is a dollar that cannot be spent expanding broadband service and connecting Americans.

Senator Wicker’s bill keeps the state-federal partnership for protection of funding intact and gives the full green light to aggressive broadband expansion. As a Mississippian and as someone who deeply cares about this issue, I say, “Good job, Senator Wicker!”

Brandon Presley serves as Northern District Public Service Commissioner for the State of Mississippi and is the President of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC).