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Written Testimony
Comptroller Kevin Lembo
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RAISED SB 846 - AN ACT CONCERNING THE MUNICIPAL GAIN, THE PREPARATION OF UTILITY POLES AND ENTERPRISE FUNDS FOR MUNICIPAL BROADBAND SERVICES.

Good afternoon Senator Needleman, Representative Arconti, Senator Formica, Representative Ferraro and members of the Energy and Technology Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Raised Senate Bill No. 846: An Act Concerning The Municipal Gain, The Preparation Of Utility Poles And Enterprise Funds For Municipal Broadband Services.

For years I have advocated for expanding access to ultra-high-speed internet at affordable prices as a means of economic development, educational advancement and consumer protection. This bill aids in those goals by giving Connecticut towns and cities more control over the types of services available to their residents.

Municipalities should be empowered to use their designated space on utility poles for any purpose, including providing access to internet service, as was stated in the original statute. This bill clarifies and strengthens that law and corrects a grievous error made by the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) last year to limit the ability of municipalities to expand internet access to their residents.

Additionally, this legislation will finally force the adoption of actionable processes on pole access and monitoring. I've spoken with private companies who are unwilling to build new internet networks in our state, often citing challenges in working with our pole administrators who are seen as an obstacle to speedy and predictable construction schedules. We need to accelerate the process of getting new internet providers access to the poles and adopt new consumer-friendly policies that will appropriately punish any unwarranted delays or inaction.

We know that competition results in lower costs and improved products -- both things that Connecticut consumers are desperately seeking from our incumbent telecom providers. Establishing new utility pole regulations, and enforcing existing ones, will help entice new entrants into the market.

In parts of Hartford -- right up the road from this building -- school children are forced to sit in fast food restaurants to do their homework because they can't afford internet access at home. In the northwest corner of this state, many residents are limited to antiquated phone-based internet service because no cable company will serve them. In Stamford, New Haven and all throughout this state, we are leaving economic opportunities untapped by neglecting to provide the next-generation internet access that will be needed to power 'The Next Big Thing', whatever that may be.

A recent study by Harvard¹ found that many municipal broadband networks offer a better product, at lower costs, with more transparent pricing than their commercial counterparts. This legislation seeks to retain the ability of Connecticut towns and cities to earn those same benefits for their residents.

It's a shame that we have to spend time this legislative session going backwards to fix PURA's mistakes when we should be racing ahead to make Connecticut the first state in the country that can guarantee access to next-generation internet speeds at affordable prices. Each day we wait is a missed opportunity and I look forward to working with the members of this committee to ensure that we reach our goal.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

¹ <https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2018/01/communityfiber>