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Guest Column:

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Broadband Expansion's Achievements and Remaining Hurdles

Between 2019 and 2021, the number of Ohioans working from home tripled, demonstrating the vital function of high-speed internet services like broadband in Ohio's workforce. Additionally, remote learning, telemedicine and other online programs continue to thrive well after the pandemic. A 2022 [analysis](#) by The Ohio State University, however, indicates over 1.4 million Ohioans continue to lack residential access to fast, reliable high-speed internet service.

The Ohio Chamber has long advocated for broadband expansion. We highlighted Ohio's access challenges and how they impede economic growth in our October 2022 report [Blueprint for Ohio's Economic Future](#). The *Blueprint* specifically calls for strategic investments in broadband connectivity to enhance development and ensure Ohio remains economically competitive in the years ahead.

That's not to say that help isn't coming. Since taking office in 2019, the DeWine/Husted Administration has made broadband expansion a key priority, investing hundreds of millions of dollars and removing regulatory hurdles to facilitate expansion. Additionally, private broadband providers across the state have continued to make significant private investments to bring high-speed internet to those who need it.

Several policy initiatives have placed Ohio on a trajectory to dramatically expand broadband infrastructure. First, with input from business and community leaders, the DeWine/Husted Administration published the [Ohio Broadband Strategy](#) in December 2019. The report is a foundational document that explores ways to leverage state resources to promote and coordinate broadband expansion efforts.

The *Ohio Broadband Strategy* created the [BroadbandOhio](#) office under the Ohio Department of Development, which was tasked with implementing the Ohio Broadband Strategy and serving as a point of contact for all broadband projects in the state. The office has been an instrumental resource for local governments and private providers trying to expand coverage and has played a pivotal role in leveraging federal dollars to construct high-speed internet.

Another pivotal step was the enactment of the Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant Program (ORBEG) through House Bill 2. The program, initially seeded with \$270 million, provides state grants to facilitate construction of residential high-speed internet service to unserved households across the state. In its first round of awards in March 2022, ORBEG awarded \$232 million to fund 104 total projects

in 62 counties, with completed construction expected to bring connectivity to nearly 100,000 households and improve broadband availability to an estimated 230,000 Ohioans.

The ORBEG program is currently awarding another \$77.5 million to assorted providers and, in the future, will utilize additional funds from the nearly \$800 million in federal dollars that Ohio received last year from the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program. The projects awarded under the ORBEG program have also been matched by at least \$250 million in private sector investment from providers.

Despite these efforts to improve accessibility, financial barriers continue to prevent broadband expansion as well. In late 2021, Congress created the Affordable Connectivity Program, appropriating \$14.2 billion to drive down the cost of high-speed internet for over 23 million households nationwide, including over 1.1 million Ohio households. However, Congress failed to reauthorize the program, and the ACP discount for households ended in June 2024.

Prior to becoming the GOP nominee for Vice President, U.S. Senator JD Vance introduced bipartisan, bicameral legislation to provide \$7 billion for an extension of the Affordable Connectivity Program. Additionally, most of Ohio's private providers continue to offer low-income programs as they continue to advocate for restoration of the ACP.

With remote work on the rise and the high demand for internet services in everyday life, it is essential for every Ohioan to have access to high-speed internet and broadband services. While a considerable amount of work remains to achieve universal coverage, our state and industry leaders have demonstrated the vision and will toward enabling all Ohioans with high-speed internet to reach their fullest potential.