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Doyle Blasts Senate Republicans for Inaction on COVID-19 Measures

House communications and technology subcommittee Chairman Mike Doyle (D., Pa.) today blasted Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) and his Republican counterparts for not considering COVID-19 packages passed by the Democratic-led House that included broadband funding.

In May, the House passed the \$3 trillion Heroes Act (HR 6800), which includes \$4 billion for a new Emergency Broadband Connectivity Fund to provide deeper Lifeline discounts (TR Daily, May 18). It also includes \$1.5 billion for a new Emergency Connectivity Fund that schools and libraries could use to provide Wi-Fi hot spots and other connected devices and services for home Internet access, among other telecom and broadband provisions.

In July, the House passed the \$1.5 trillion Moving Forward Act (HR 2) infrastructure package, which includes \$100 billion to improve availability and access to high-speed broadband across the country (TR Daily, July 1). The bill includes provisions that aim to promote competition for broadband internet infrastructure in unserved and underserved communities, prioritizing those with persistent poverty; address remote learning and gaps in broadband adoption and digital skills; and provide support for broadband service to low-income households and the recently unemployed.

In taped remarks for the virtual 2020 Incompas Show, Rep. Doyle mentioned the bills and complained that Mr. McConnell would not let the Senate consider them. In every COVID-19 relief bill proposed or voted on, Democrats have included billions of dollars in broadband funding, he said.

“In so many ways, this crisis is worsening the digital divide in separating the digital haves and the have nots,” Mr. Doyle said. He said Democrats have urged the FCC to expand the E-rate program, and he also emphasized the importance of Lifeline.

The congressman noted that FCC Chairman Ajit Pai’s Keep Americans Connected Pledge expired in June. He said that while he is pleased that broadband providers are working to connect students with broadband service in their homes, he said the U.S. “can’t rely on corporate promises alone and donations alone to get us through this.” Government action is needed, he said, adding that “many opportunities already” have been missed.

Mr. Doyle’s remarks sounded at times like a campaign speech for Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden. He said that if Mr. Biden wins, Democrats would connect all Americans with broadband and ensure that broadband costs are lowered. He also said that net neutrality rules would be restored and broadband networks would be “more competitive.”

If President Trump is reelected, the digital divide will continue to grow, he suggested.

In other remarks at today's event, House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn (D., S.C.), chairman of the Rural Broadband Task Force, said that passing broadband legislation will be a key priority next year. He said Congress was unlikely to get any further meaningful COVID-19 aid bill through this year.

"It will absolutely be a top priority next year," Mr. Clyburn said, adding that anything that Congress passes this year would only be "somewhat of a stopgap, a fill-in. It'll be small-bore. Nothing like we need."

"I think this has sufficient bipartisan support for us to move forward on this. COVID-19 has been an eye-opener to everybody, he added. —Paul Kirby, paul.kirby@wolterskluwer.com

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