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Public Utilities Commission of Ohio

RE: AEP Ohio's GridSmart Phase 3 Application Broadband Access Proposal

Case # 19-1475-EL-RDR

Dear Commissioners of the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio:

AEP Ohio has submitted a proposal as part of its GridSmart Phase 3 application that would provide for expanded broadband access in rural areas of the state. Their proposal would enable broadband providers to tap into a fiber optic network and serve our residents and businesses. As the events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted, broadband access is critical for our students to learn, our businesses to thrive and grow and our communities to prosper.

When the pandemic subsides, we will still need access to reliable high-speed internet services. High-speed internet is critical for economic development of all types. Factories and warehouses need reliable broadband the same as many tech facilities might. It can usher in new healthcare options, including telehealth, which will enable better health outcomes for residents in our area. And high-speed internet access can be an equalizing factor in education. Having access at home means learners won't have to search for public access points at libraries or fast food restaurants.

Our communities have been left with limited options because we are small and extending services to us hasn't been a priority. However, AEP Ohio's plan can help eliminate a significant barrier to access by allowing internet service providers to tap in to their fiber network.

AEP Ohio is building a fiber network as part of their next-generation electric grid buildout. A small additional investment would allow internet service providers access to a middle-mile network that could be used to provide high-speed internet access to customers in smaller rural communities and other underserved areas. This middle-mile piece is the "missing link" in bringing high-speed internet service to these underserved areas. Allowing AEP Ohio to construct middle-mile network infrastructure will allow internet service providers to focus their investments on providing access to Ohioans currently without high-speed internet.

The additional investment that AEP Ohio would make to implement the proposal in their plan is cost-effective and would be subject to your oversight. Any revenues they earn from leasing the lines to providers would be used to cover the cost of building and maintaining the network. Our communities get more reliable electric service and access to technology that can help our residents find new opportunities.

Ohioans in rural areas deserve to share in the same learning, economic development and societal benefits that broadband internet service can help facilitate. Access to these opportunities, along with better healthcare access and other benefits can be accomplished through AEP Ohio's proposal. We ask that you approve AEP Ohio's request and help bridge the digital divide.

Sincerely,

Benjamin J. King
City Administrator

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