

OPINION**Reconfirmation of FCC Chairman Should Not Fall Victim to Partisanship**BY **BETSY HUBER**

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Late Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell filed for cloture on the reconfirmation of Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai. Of course, in today's divisive political climate, what should be a straightforward reconfirmation of a respected public official will likely become a flash point for those who disagree with him.

At the National Grange, we have had the privilege of working directly with Pai on a number of telecommunications issues that directly affect the lives of millions of Americans, and particularly those in rural communities. We have witnessed firsthand — and repeatedly — his commitment to inclusive policies that ensure all Americans can reap the benefits of the digital age.

In his relatively brief but accomplished nine-month tenure as FCC chairman, Pai has shown a clear commitment to closing the digital divide. In his first official remarks as chairman, he said “one of our core priorities going forward should be to close that divide.” One week later, Pai announced the formation of the Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee. This committee, which includes representation from the National Grange, has been tasked with providing recommendations to the commission on how to accelerate the deployment of high-speed internet access. Such recommendations will include removing

regulatory hurdles to infrastructure investment so that the 28 percent of rural households that lack adequate, high-speed internet service will have new options to connect.

A larger vision, the “Digital Empowerment Agenda,” lays out a road map for how Pai approaches the digital divide faced by many rural Americans. Released in September 2016 while he was still a commissioner, the agenda encompasses a number of points that are designed to bolster broadband access in remote communities for “every American who wants it.”

The FCC – and even Congress – is now executing on this plan, including Pai’s proposed “Gigabit Opportunity Zones.” Inspired by former Housing Secretary Jack Kemp, the zones are designed to promote broadband network deployment in both rural and urban communities through a host of incentives including financial incentives for providers, streamlining state and local policies, and offering tax credits for entrepreneurs to take advantage of these networks and to create new jobs. Recently, the proposal inspired bipartisan legislation from Sens. Shelley Moore Capito and Chris Coons as well as Rep. Doug Collins, which sets the chairman’s idea into motion.

In another attempt to boost broadband deployment, this FCC also adopted a successful public-private partnership framework known as the “Mobility Fund,” which is designed to invest over \$4.5 billion in the next decade on build out of 4G LTE wireless service in rural and Tribal parts of the U.S. Approximately 575,000 square miles in the United States still lack adequate 4G access, but with this initiative, these removed areas will benefit from \$453 million in annual support.

In his first 100 days alone as chairman, Pai demonstrated he was ready to come to work for the American people. Nine months later, that promise still holds true. As the U.S. Senate prepares to vote on Pai’s

reconfirmation, they should keep in mind his track record of accomplishments. They should remember his priority to travel to all parts of the United States near and far (4,000 miles just this year on road trips), and meet face-to-face with Americans from all walks of life to better understand their needs and the challenges they face. And they ought not to forget the widespread support he received when former President Barack Obama nominated him to serve as an FCC commissioner.

Pai deserves credit and respect for being a public official committed to doing what's right, even in the face of backlash fueled by divisiveness. We at the National Grange support his reconfirmation to enable him to continue the effort to fully deploy equitable broadband service to rural America.

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