

## Maine Public Advocate: T-Mobile merger, NECEC corridor would help fix our state's broadband crisis

By Barry Hobbins – Special to the Press Herald

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Today, thousands of Mainers – 200,000, by some estimates – still lack reliable, affordable access to high-speed internet. Their lack of connectivity comes at a great cost to them and to our state. It not only means Maine families, consumers, and small businesses are at an economic disadvantage, but also could be putting one of Maine's largest industries at risk.

According to the [Maine Office of Tourism](#), nearly 1 out of every 6 jobs in Maine supports tourism and total tourism expenditures in 2018 exceeded \$6.2 billion. If we want Maine to continue being a choice destination for tourists, we must ensure that Maine offers them the same broadband connectivity as their homes and offices do.

Affordable access to reliable broadband is critical to our state's success, which is why I have prioritized expanding it during my tenure as Maine's public advocate. Earlier this month, I participated in a roundtable discussion with several New England policymakers and thought leaders about how we can bridge the digital divide. During our discussion, we spoke about the many private- and public-sector projects currently underway to increase broadband access in New England, including the New England Clean Energy Connect corridor and the deployment of New T-Mobile's 5G network.

The NECEC corridor will drive economic opportunity and development across our state, and broadband deployment is a substantial component of the initiative. As the state's public advocate, I was part of the team that ensured \$20 million would be set aside to invest in broadband infrastructure and expanded fiber-optic capacity in underserved communities, such as The Forks as well as Franklin, Somerset and parts of Androscoggin counties. This is a major step toward delivering broadband to Mainers who currently lack an affordable broadband connection.

The other significant development is the deployment of 5G technology. Last summer, I endorsed the proposed merger of T-Mobile and Sprint for a variety of reasons, including the merged company's proposal to deploy 5G over a broad range of spectrum in ways that would provide rural residents with improved signal quality, coverage, reliability and capacity. That notion was reaffirmed during the roundtable discussion by Boston College law professor Daniel Lyons when he noted that combining Sprint's 5G-ready 2.5-gigahertz spectrum with T-Mobile's complementary low-band spectrum assets and infrastructure would provide additional connectivity to urban areas and, more importantly for Maine, allow the merged company to expand into more rural locations.

My support for the merger of T-Mobile and Sprint has only been bolstered by T-Mobile and Sprint having filed enforceable commitments with the Federal Communications Commission to ensure that rural Americans receive the same 5G services as their urban counterparts. New T-Mobile's commitment to providing rural Americans with 5G technology comes with

two important benefits: First, the new company has committed to providing more than half of the country's rural residents access to high-speed services with unprecedented download speeds of 100 megabits per second or higher within three years of the merger's close. With speeds like those, New T-Mobile will be able to deliver a true alternative to in-home broadband.

As someone who has spent years living, working and representing a rural state, I know just how essential an affordable and reliable broadband connection is. And I am confident that New T-Mobile stands ready to deliver on their commitments to help all Mainers – students, small businesses and tourists alike – succeed.

I am thankful that I had the opportunity to participate at the roundtable in Boston because it gave me the opportunity to articulate that the broadband status quo in New England is simply unacceptable and that we must do better to ensure everyone is connected. It also provided the opportunity to discuss the NECEC corridor and New T-Mobile's commitments to connect rural Americans: two projects I believe have the potential to close New England's digital divide.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Barry Hobbins** is Maine's public advocate. He served in the Maine Senate in 1988-1990 and 2006-2010, and in the Maine House of Representatives in 1972-1984 and 2012-2016. Hobbins was Senate chair of the Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee from 2008 to 2010 and House chair of the committee from 2012 to 2014.