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Helena, Montana

### **Legislature Passes Game-Changing Broadband Bills**

The 2021 Montana Legislature adjourned on Thursday after passing several bills designed to move Montana out of the bottom of the rankings among other states when it comes to access to quality broadband infrastructure. Of particular significance are SB 297, HB 632 and SB 51.

[SB 297](#). Sponsored by Sen. Jason Ellsworth (R-Hamilton), the “ConnectMT” broadband infrastructure program establishes a grant and proposal process for funding broadband expansion and enhancement in Montana. The bill defines eligible nongovernmental broadband providers and sets out criteria for reviewing applications for broadband funding. It prioritizes investment in “frontier,” unserved and underserved areas and includes a number of criteria for reviewing broadband projects. “MTA commends Sen. Ellsworth for his prodigious efforts in passing this bill,” said Montana Telecommunications Association (MTA) general manager, Geoff Feiss. “Sen. Ellsworth’s bill is a substantial step forward in making sure we move the needle toward the goal of ubiquitous access to high-performance, future-proof broadband to all Montanans.”

[HB 632](#). Sponsored by Rep. Frank Garner (R-Kalispell), this bill allocates over \$1 billion appropriated by Congress in March from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Among other things, HB 632 appropriates \$275 million in broadband communications funding, to be implemented by the Department of Commerce under SB 297. The bill requires matching funds from private entities and local governments, and like SB 297, prioritizes funding to frontier, unserved and underserved areas. The bill also creates an advisory commission comprising 3 Senators, 3 Representatives and 3 members appointed by the Governor to review and recommend proposed broadband projects. “Thanks to Rep. Garner’s diligence, HB 632 provides a substantial down payment on Montana’s broadband future,” according to MTA’s general manager, Geoff Feiss.

[SB 51](#). Also sponsored by Sen. Ellsworth, this bill provides a property tax moratorium on the deployment of new fiber optic facilities in Montana—except new fiber funded by SB 297. “This bill will help defray the costs of deploying additional fiber optic cable in Montana while building local tax base and improving access to broadband service,” said MTA’s Feiss.

These bills comprise some of the boldest broadband deployment initiatives country. MTA expresses its profound gratitude to Sen. Ellsworth and Rep. Garner for their efforts to improve Internet connectivity Montana.

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