In some rural parts of Ohio, access to broadband seems a long way off, with entire areas lacking access to high-speed internet service. For other businesses and residents, the infrastructure is frustratingly close, but out of reach.

“We have a marbling effect throughout the rest of the state — even in suburban and urban areas — where we have a street over here or a cluster of homes over there that cannot get broadband infrastructure built out to them,” Ohio Rep. Rick Carfagna explains.

Two separate bills are being considered this year to address those two distinct problems associated with Ohio’s digital divide.

Under HB 378 [2], the state would use some money from its existing Third Frontier Initiative ($50 million for each of the next two years from the proceeds of bond issues) to help fund broadband infrastructure projects in underserved areas of the state.

“Third Frontier was created to help accelerate the growth of small businesses and technology companies in Ohio,” explains Rep. Jack Cera, who represents a part of the sparsely populated Appalachia region and who is sponsoring HB 378. “Without access to broadband, many of our residents lack the resources to be a part of that exciting opportunity.”

The legislation would create a grant program and allow private businesses, political subdivisions, nonprofit entities and cooperatives to apply. For each project, the grant could not exceed 50 percent of the total project cost or $5 million, whichever is less. These additional state dollars could help grant recipients install new middle-mile or last-mile infrastructure, obtain construction permits, construct new facilities, purchase equipment, or install and test high-speed service.

Carfagna’s plan for addressing the “marbling effect,” meanwhile, is to establish a new partnership between the state, local governments and broadband providers. “By pooling resources and having all parties place some ‘skin in the game,’ the existing financial barriers become far less intimidating,” he says.

Under HB 281 [3], local governments would identify clusters of unserved homes and issue a request for proposals from providers outlining what it would take to get service to these areas — in particular, what are the existing “cost hurdles”? Then, to overcome these hurdles, the state would offer matching grants to local jurisdictions willing to help pay the costs that private providers are not willing to absorb.

Both bills passed the House this year with high levels of support; as of May, they were under consideration in the state Senate.

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