



House Bill 1328

*Economic Development – Broadband Providers – Joint Trenching and Fee
(Building Out Broadband Act of 2021)*

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**

To: Economic Matters Committee

Date: March 4, 2021

From: Drew Jabin

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS** HB 1328 as it addresses a priority initiative of Maryland’s 24 county jurisdictions.

This bill would help to close Maryland’s persistent digital divide by enhancing incentives and orchestrating opportunities for broadband deployment across the state.

The pandemic has laid bare the urgent need to fully close the digital divide in rural and underserved areas of the state. Access to stable, reliable, and affordable high-speed internet is an essential component of a county’s economic development and the socio-economic advancements of its residents. Residents benefit from increased economic growth, improved labor market access and outcomes, access to better health care, enhanced civic participation, enriched education opportunities, improved quality of life, and overall competitive and vibrant communities.

HB 1328 establishes a statewide “dig once” policy to encourage underground fiber deployment in conjunction with road construction projects. This joint trenching program will provide telecommunication companies a more efficient and expedient process for broadband deployment. The bill also authorizes local governments to adopt local policies to accelerate the deployment of high-speed internet to rural and underserved areas, and expresses the intent of the General Assembly that future federal funding decisions prioritize expanding broadband service.

The Abell Foundation’s “Disconnected in Maryland” report, from this year, shows that more than 500,000 Maryland households do not currently subscribe to wireline broadband services. MACo and county government stand ready to work with state policy makers to bridge the divide and provide residents the access they need and deserve.

HB 1328 takes an important step in furthering the mutual goal of providing broadband access to all residents and accordingly, MACo **SUPPORTS** HB 1328 and requests a **FAVORABLE** report.