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**SUBSTITUTE SENATE BILL 5383**

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**State of Washington 67th Legislature 2021 Regular Session**

**By** Senate Environment, Energy & Technology (originally sponsored by Senators Wellman, Short, Hunt, King, Lovelett, Nguyen, Randall, Saldaña, Warnick, Wilson, C., and Wilson, L.)

AN ACT Relating to authorizing a public utility district to provide retail telecommunications services in unserved areas under certain conditions; amending RCW 54.16.330 and 43.330.538; adding a new section to chapter 42.56 RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The legislature finds that the COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that equitable access to education can only happen with equitable access to reliable broadband. Under Article IX, section 1 of the state Constitution, it is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within the state of Washington. Increasing broadband access to unserved areas of the state is of vital importance to increasing educational opportunities in the parts of our state that without broadband access cannot safely participate in our educational system.

The legislature further finds that in order to achieve our constitutional duty to provide equitable access to education, we must allow our public utility districts to provide retail telecommunications services to people in an area where no broadband provider is serving or has plans to serve in the near future.

**Sec.**  RCW 54.16.330 and 2019 c 365 s 9 are each amended to read as follows:

(1)(a) A public utility district in existence on June 8, 2000, may construct, purchase, acquire, develop, finance, lease, license, handle, provide, add to, contract for, interconnect, alter, improve, repair, operate, and maintain any telecommunications facilities within or without the district's limits for the following purposes:

(i) For the district's internal telecommunications needs;

(ii) For the provision of wholesale telecommunications services within the district and by contract with another public utility district.

(b) Except as provided in subsections (8) and (10) of this section, nothing in this section shall be construed to authorize public utility districts to provide telecommunications services to end users.

(2) A public utility district providing wholesale or retail telecommunications services shall ensure that rates, terms, and conditions for such services are not unduly or unreasonably discriminatory or preferential. Rates, terms, and conditions are discriminatory or preferential when a public utility district offering rates, terms, and conditions to an entity for wholesale or retail telecommunications services does not offer substantially similar rates, terms, and conditions to all other entities seeking substantially similar services.

(3) A public utility district providing wholesale or retail telecommunications services shall not be required to, but may, establish a separate utility system or function for such purpose. In either case, a public utility district providing wholesale or retail telecommunications services shall separately account for any revenues and expenditures for those services according to standards established by the state auditor pursuant to its authority in chapter 43.09 RCW and consistent with the provisions of this title. Any revenues received from the provision of wholesale or retail telecommunications services must be dedicated to costs incurred to build and maintain any telecommunications facilities constructed, installed, or acquired to provide such services, including payments on debt issued to finance such services, until such time as any bonds or other financing instruments executed after June 8, 2000, and used to finance such telecommunications facilities are discharged or retired.

(4) When a public utility district provides wholesale or retail telecommunications services, all telecommunications services rendered to the district for the district's internal telecommunications needs shall be allocated or charged at its true and full value. A public utility district may not charge its nontelecommunications operations rates that are preferential or discriminatory compared to those it charges entities purchasing wholesale or retail telecommunications services.

(5) If a person or entity receiving retail telecommunications services from a public utility district under this section has a complaint regarding the reasonableness of the rates, terms, conditions, or services provided, the person or entity may file a complaint with the district commission.

(6) A public utility district shall not exercise powers of eminent domain to acquire telecommunications facilities or contractual rights held by any other person or entity to telecommunications facilities.

(7) Except as otherwise specifically provided, a public utility district may exercise any of the powers granted to it under this title and other applicable laws in carrying out the powers authorized under this section. Nothing in chapter 81, Laws of 2000 limits any existing authority of a public utility district under this title.

(8)(a) If an internet service provider operating on telecommunications facilities of a public utility district that provides wholesale telecommunications services but does not provide retail telecommunications services, ceases to provide access to the internet to its end-use customers, and no other retail service providers are willing to provide service, the public utility district may provide retail telecommunications services to the end-use customers of the defunct internet service provider in order for end-use customers to maintain access to the internet until a replacement internet service provider is, or providers are, in operation.

(b) Within thirty days of an internet service provider ceasing to provide access to the internet, the public utility district must initiate a process to find a replacement internet service provider or providers to resume providing access to the internet using telecommunications facilities of a public utility district.

(c) For a maximum period of five months, following initiation of the process begun in (b) of this section, or, if earlier than five months, until a replacement internet service provider is, or providers are, in operation, the district commission may establish a rate for providing access to the internet and charge customers to cover expenses necessary to provide access to the internet.

(9) The tax treatment of the retail telecommunications services provided by a public utility district to the end-use customers during the period specified in subsection (8) of this section must be the same as if those retail telecommunications services were provided by the defunct internet service provider.

(10)(a) A public utility district may provide retail telecommunications services to an end user in an unserved area if the public utility district receives notice from the governor's statewide broadband office, established in RCW 43.330.532, that an existing broadband service provider has not submitted an objection and a broadband service plan required in this subsection for the same project area. Prior to beginning a project to provide retail telecommunications services in this subsection, a public utility district must notify the governor's statewide broadband office of its intent to provide such services and post a notice of intent on its public website. The governor's statewide broadband office must post notices received from a public utility district pursuant to this subsection on its public website.

(b) Any existing broadband service provider providing broadband services near the proposed project area may, within 30 days of the posting of the notice of intent under (a) of this subsection, submit the following in writing to the office:

(i) An objection demonstrating that the project would result in overbuild, meaning that the objecting broadband service provider currently provides, or has begun construction to provide, broadband service to end users in the proposed project area at speeds equal to or greater than 150 megabits per second; and

(ii) If an existing broadband service provider intends to prevent overbuild as provided in (b)(i) of this subsection, then the existing service provider must submit a broadband service plan to the governor's statewide broadband office. The broadband service plan must, at a minimum, demonstrate that the existing service provider currently provides broadband service to end users near the unserved area at speeds equal to or greater than the speed goals contained in RCW 43.330.536 and outline how the existing broadband service provider intends to provide broadband service with speeds of at least 150 megabits per second to the unserved area. A broadband service plan is confidential and exempt from public inspection and copying under chapter 42.56 RCW.

(c) For the purposes of this subsection:

(i) "Broadband service" has the same meaning as defined in RCW 43.330.530.

(ii) "Unserved areas" has the same meaning as defined in RCW 43.330.530.

**Sec.**  RCW 43.330.538 and 2019 c 365 s 6 are each amended to read as follows:

(1)(a) Beginning January 1, 2021, and biennially thereafter, the office shall report to the legislative committees with jurisdiction over broadband policy and finance on the office's activities during the previous two years.

((~~(2)~~)) (b) The report must, at a minimum, contain:

((~~(a)~~)) (i) An analysis of the current availability and use of broadband, including average broadband speeds, within the state;

((~~(b)~~)) (ii) Information gathered from schools, libraries, hospitals, and public safety facilities across the state, determining the actual speed and capacity of broadband currently in use and the need, if any, for increases in speed and capacity to meet current or anticipated needs;

((~~(c)~~)) (iii) An overview of incumbent broadband infrastructure within the state;

((~~(d)~~)) (iv) A summary of the office's activities in coordinating broadband infrastructure development with the public works board, including a summary of funds awarded under RCW 43.155.160;

((~~(e)~~)) (v) Suggested policies, incentives, and legislation designed to accelerate the achievement of the goals under RCW 43.330.536; and

((~~(f)~~)) (vi) Any proposed legislative and policy initiatives.

(2)(a) By December 31, 2023, the office must submit a report to the governor and the appropriate committees of the legislature evaluating the effectiveness of authorizing a public utility district to provide retail telecommunications services to unserved areas as provided in RCW 54.16.330(10).

(b) The report must, at a minimum, contain:

(i) The number of public utility districts providing retail telecommunications services in an unserved area authorized in RCW 54.16.330(10);

(ii) An analysis on the effectiveness of the broadband service plans required in RCW 54.16.330(10); and

(iii) Any recommendations to improve the provision of retail telecommunications services in unserved areas.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 42.56 RCW to read as follows:

A broadband service plan submitted by a broadband service provider to the governor's statewide broadband office established in RCW 43.330.532 in accordance with the requirements under RCW 54.16.330(10) are exempt from disclosure under this chapter.

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