Text for State of WISPA speech

Introduction
So good to see all your smiling faces. I know that’s the coffee at work. Welcome to WISPAmerica 2019! We have so much in this year’s event I can’t wait to get it rolling. Tons of sessions on subjects like network engineering, tower safety, grassroots marketing, social media, accounting practices, human resources and, of course, regulatory issues. We even have an Animal Farm. And an FCC Commissioner (not in the Animal Farm, of course). We’ve also got a convention hall with over ___ vendors, waiting to show you the latest state of the art products and services to help your businesses deliver high-speed Internet and more to your customers.

What I love about the WISP industry is we’re like a family. We come here to learn and share our experiences with our colleagues across the country, making the fixed wireless broadband industry a shining example of what works here in America and around the world.

As a father of 3, I understand and appreciate the time and resource commitment it takes to come out here, leaving your customers, employees and families at home. So what the entire WISPA team does is try to put together a show that gives you real solutions that make your businesses better and more profitable, as well as improve the lives of those you serve.

I’ve been with WISPA for about a year now. Or as my 5 year old son put it last week, “when you were not SO old”. Seriously, he looked at a picture taken just last year and said that. I’m still amazed at all the things you do to bring broadband to the communities you serve – your neighbors, local schools, police and fire departments, houses of worship and main street businesses, among others. You’re an integral part of the fabric that makes your communities so unique, vibrant and great.

Approximately 2000 WISPs (a good number of whom are sitting in this room now!) dot the U.S. landscape. Small businesses with fewer than 1,500 subs, providing “fixed wireless” high-speed, broadband services to more than 4 million Americans, many of whom reside in rural and remote areas. Most of you have built your networks with your own dollars, not federal subsidies. And in spite of that – or, by virtue of that, really – customers like your services and want more.

Not surprisingly, the WISP industry is poised to grow to new heights – by some estimates doubling the number of subscribers by 2021!

No doubt, there are challenges like streaming video, which consumes more than half of all Internet traffic at given points in the day; the dozen or so smartphone and tablets in the average American household; and nearly 50 billion IoT devices coming online by the end of the decade. But I know there’s something more going on, too. The WISP industry provides innovation on par with any Silicon Valley company, coming up with solutions and answers to connectivity challenges that, quite frankly, the big cable and mobile wireless companies can’t and won’t touch.

Put simply, we have tremendous stories to tell.

The case for WISPA
But...and there’s a big but...
Those stories alone do not sustain growth and profitability for our industry. As recent survey found, the biggest challenges WISPs see inhibiting financial success are access to capital and spectrum access.

It goes without saying that spectrum is our fuel. Without it – whether unlicensed, “lightly licensed” or licensed – we can’t operate. And, no matter who you talk to, there’s simply not enough of it. Moreover, the unlicensed spectrum that our ecosystem uses has become ever-more crowded and noisy.

The problem is we do not have quality access to licensed spectrum. The average WISP has 0 MHz of licensed spectrum. On average, the big 4 mobile companies each possess between 100-200 Mhz of sub-6 GHz spectrum nationwide. But surprisingly, Uncle Sam – and especially the DoD – occupies the field: holding more than 85% of all useable spectrum today and they’re not all that keen to let go of it.

Sometimes it takes legislation to get the spectrum pipeline flowing. The average piece of legislation, from introduction to signing, takes about seven years. And that’s when all the sides are aligned and the interests clear. This, of course, ignores the run-up to the policies underlying any given bill, which may take generations to bubble up into acceptance.

At the agency level, it’s even murkier. The FCC, for instance, doesn’t have to do much unless a statute tells the Commission what to do. Consequently, the Commission has immense discretion to move at its own pace, how it wants, and where it wants. Calls for rulemakings or other actions can languish for years – sometimes even when Congress has instructed it to act.

We’ve had success in the past, in large part because we have a great story to tell. We don’t depend on flashy advertisements, gimmicky billing, and creative bandwidth rationing to serve our Wall Street masters. We are the real deal, delivering high-speed Internet, 24/7/365 where the local telephone and cable companies won’t. We can do this quickly and at 1/7th the capital cost of fiber. Small business. Rural. Delivering last mile broadband services to isolated, underserved locales. These are huge selling points to policymakers. Quite frankly, your businesses represent a big part of the solution to the so-called digital divide that policymakers cry for.

But this brings up the legitimate question: If policymakers say they want more of us, how come we don’t win as often as we think we should?

Well, when it comes to spectrum, we’re up against some of the biggest, most capital-intensive businesses in the world. And they lobby hard. The space is loaded with big spenders. Last year, AT&T spent $18 million lobbying; Verizon $12 million; T-Mo $8 million, and Sprint, a “mere” $3 million. Added to this, Big Mobile’s industry association – CTIA – spent $11 million.

But wait, there’s more. It’s not just Big Mobile that wants in.

You can’t forget the broadcasting industry, with its industry group, the National Association of Broadcasters, spending $14 million last year.

Or, the defense industry. Boeing spent $15 million; and Lockheed Martin $13 million.

Or, the transportation industry, with General Motors laying out $8 million, and Ford $4 million.

Or, even the refrigerator makers, with GE coughing up $6 million last year.

You get the idea.
And what sort of lobbying firepower was WISPA able to use to counteract that? Surely we spent at least 1% of what Big Mobile and Big Broadcasting spent. How about less than 0.2%?

And it isn’t just lobbying Congress. It is raising a chorus of voices in addition to your own. Occasionally people will write nice things about our industry. That has been earned, not bought. In the past couple years the mobile wireless industry is estimated to have paid over 300 other organizations to help amplify its message. Over the past couple years, WISPA paid 0.

Sure, it isn’t just money, it is also the number of people you have working to advocate for your industry. While all the big mobile providers have dozens of attorneys and lobbyists. In 2018, CTIA had 58 people on staff. Each member company has at least a dozen lobbyists and regulatory attorneys on staff as well. In 2018, WISPA had 0 regulatory attorneys on staff.

So, how on earth are we getting heard in Washington? And, more importantly, how are we delivering for you?

WISPA long ago decided that a Washington presence is a necessity. That was a long-term goal of the founders of WISPA, and over the years, with the visionary leadership and volunteering of the WISPA Board and Committees, we slowly built a real presence. This year we’re augmenting that with several additional full-time staff to ensure that we’re advocating as fiercely and effectively as we can given our budget.

Over the past year, myself and our and professional contractors had hundreds of meetings with policymakers, made more than 50 agency filings, participated in innumerable conferences and speaking engagements, wrote countless column-inches of press releases, Facebook posts, Tweets and other advocacy, talked for hours with reporters, and worked with all manner of groups and coalitions to achieve our goals.

And this work has had a positive effect.

For example, it got us a spot to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives on the economics of connecting rural America with broadband. There, we urged lawmakers that that task could be accomplished more quickly and cost-effectively through fixed wireless services. Through WISPs.

On the heels of this, we placed an op-ed in a leading Hill publication, criticizing Washington’s myopic focus on 5G, stating, “it doesn’t do anything for rural and under-served areas, where 24 million Americans have no G,” and where fixed wireless broadband operators do not have enough access to good spectrum to reach customers that are within range of their towers right now.”

Listen how to how this line started to spread. The “no G” had its genesis in an FCC filing WISPA made in late 2017. This “No G” meme was then picked up by Montana Senator John Tester, and then Vermont Congressman Peter Welch, in their criticism about the lack of progress in getting more rural Americans online. The press jumped on it, too.

Which then brought us to an invitation to the White House’s summit on 5G, where we were able to press our case further. For WISPs. You know what they say in Washington, if you are not at the table you are on the menu….We are finally getting our seats at the table!
Our continued efforts create a virtuous circle, of sorts, which folds upon itself and grows other opportunities, including getting the rules around the CAF Phase II subsidy auction good enough that WISPs could participate. And participate they did! Over half of the available $1.5 billion went to WISPs.

Additionally, WISPA plays an active role so many issues:

- The FCC’s Spectrum Horizons proceeding
- FCC rules on partitioning, disaggregation, and leasing of spectrum
- The C-band
- CBRS
- 5.9 GHz
- The 6 GHz band
- TV White Spaces
- 24 GHz
- 37 GHz
- Proposing rules for the Connect America Fund program
- Keeping FCC reporting obligations to a minimum
- Reforming FCC and USDA subsidy programs to further promote WISP market entry
- Broadband competition and deployment / bridging the digital divide
- Fair access to rights-of-way, poles and other infrastructure by WISPs
- Net Neutrality and updating the Communications Act
- Federal privacy legislation
- The Ray Baum’s Act
- Access to Federal Lands for Broadband Infrastructure
- Plans for more broadband infrastructure to service Veterans in Rural America
- NTIA’s Smart Cities Working Group
- And, key standards-setting bodies that act as private-sector regulators of our industry

We work especially closely with the FCC, the industry’s main regulator. A great example and result of this – the tip of the iceberg of our work there, so to speak – are recent visits to WISP facilities by FCC Chairman Pai, as well as Commissioners Carr and O’Rielly. There, they met with Leap Wireless, On-Ramp Indiana, and Intelliwave, which demonstrated to the Commissioners how they’re bringing high-speed broadband to under-served Americans. Even today, Commissioner Carr and Congressman Latta are visiting our own Mark Radabaugh’s Amplex in Northwest Ohio today.

These meetings signal to others in the communications ecosystem that the WISP industry cannot be ignored. That we’re the real deal.

Not only do Uncle Sam’s alphabet agencies come to us for guidance, we are regularly asked for policy input from the House and Senate, which last summer’s House testimony reflects.

And, the press – DC’s informal policymakers – want to know what we think, and then report those positions in their well-read publications.

All this and more could not have occurred but for WISPA’s Washington presence. We’ve kicked in the door and are punching above our weight.
Accomplishing more
So, how do we accomplish even more? It requires two things: more WISP advocacy and more WISPA advocacy.

First, we need you. We desperately need your help and active engagement! While we will never have the lobbying dollars that Big Mobile has, we have something that is ultimately more powerful – YOU!
Great service to your customers and building your business is always a top priority – but WISPA needs your collective voices to augment what we’re doing in DC and around the country. AS I mentioned before, in Washington if you are not at the table you are on the menu – and we need YOU to join US at the table. Your voices and presence can help us overcome the lobbying disparity between us and the mobile industry – unlike Big Mobile, you reside and employ people in the community – YOU are Congress’s constituents - the ones they ultimately report to. This is something we have that Big Mobile and others don’t. You make this personal and that alone can change outcomes in amazing ways.

Now, we’re not asking you to move to D.C. And you wouldn’t want to anyway. But there are ways you can help quickly and easily. One way is this: Please take out your phones and text “WISPA” to 50457. You’ll get a link to our advocacy tool where all you’ll need to do is add your name and contact details; customize the language if you like; click on “send,” and your elected officials will hear from you. If everyone in this room will do this right now, or anytime today, we will make sure that your elected representatives will hear from you – and from hundreds of your peers on C-Band spectrum issues.

On the flip side, if you don’t engage, you are asking us to fight with our dominant hand tied behind our back.

There are other ways to get active, too. Letters, phone calls, host a member of Congress at your WISP, in-person meetings with representatives, etc. We need champions to emerge from this group we have here, we will help you all tell your fixed wireless story to policymakers. It is a proven game changer – a key piece of our program to get our message out and understood.

Another avenue to engage is through your great customer service. Really.

You know, the cable, telco and mobile industries continually get dinged for their awful customer service. You may remember the forest fires in California last Autumn, where one of the big four mobile companies got hammered by the press, legislators and policymakers because they sold an “unlimited plan” to firefighters battling the blaze which turns out wasn’t so unlimited. This apparently hampered the firefighters, which Californians rightfully take very seriously. Not only did it hurt the company’s brand, the poor service boomeranged back on it, too, with the incident being used against it – some say persuasively – in legal and regulatory arguments favoring heavy-handed Title II Net Neutrality regulation.

Put simply – regulators and legislators won’t give us the time of day if WISPs get 1-star Yelp reviews. Advocate for our industry by providing great fixed wireless broadband service. It’s that simple.

Bottom line, it’s easier than you think to get engaged through WISPA, and we’re here to help guide you through that process. If you are interested in turning the tide in Washington to our favor, please feel free to come see me, or any of our government relations staff here.
Second, as I mentioned previously we are beefing up WISPA’s presence in Washington, DC. In the past when we were a volunteer advocacy organization, we had a lot of impact thanks to the leadership of past WISPA boards and committee chairs. Volunteerism is still absolutely critical to our success, but so is having full-time advocates on the ground in DC.

So in addition to our already outstanding consultant team that has been helping WISPA for many years, we are continuing the evolution of WISPA that has full-fledged advocacy organization as a component. With the recent hiring of a full-time government affairs person and full-time communications person this past month. We are still looking to hire an in-house regulatory person to round off the core DC team. They are part of our plan to continue closing our advocacy gap in DC.

A brief look at this year’s policy focus
So what are we training this firepower on?

WISPA’s federal legislative and agency efforts for the coming year will focus on four primary objectives:

One: Balanced spectrum approaches, ensuring that small and rural providers have a fair shot at accessing airwaves that are critical building blocks for fast, reliable broadband.

Two: Limited subsidy programs that expedite broadband deployment to unserved locations in a technology-neutral and cost-effective manner.

Three: Fast and fair access to infrastructure for broadband deployments no matter the location, whether federal, state, municipal, or private.

And four: Keeping small businesses competitive by ensuring regulatory burdens are appropriately scaled for those who have the least ability to shoulder them.

We all believe that smart spectrum policy is the fastest, most cost-effective way to deploy broadband in rural, underserved and disadvantaged areas. And we are working on to get the government to recognize that too! We’re ready, willing and able NOW to serve all Americans with our fixed wireless broadband services. Only policy and politics stand in our way.

So, let’s go a little deeper on a couple of key issues which have kept us busy of late.

“C-Band” (3.7-4.2 GHz) – As you may know, WISPA is a founding member of the Broadband Access Coalition. The Coalition’s primary priority here is enabling a framework in the band which will unlock gigabit rural broadband, mainly by sharing a significant amount of spectrum in the upper portion of the band. The band is generally used for satellite industry earth stations. We are calling for 300 megahertz of that spectrum to be made available on a shared basis for fixed, point-to-multipoint broadband services. Not surprisingly, Big Mobile has been very vocal at the FCC on this, too, initially asking for all 500 megahertz of that available spectrum. Thankfully, the space is not as complex as CBRS; and we’re working with other stakeholders to modernize the FCC’s frequency coordination rules to properly share there. The satellite industry currently receives “full band, full arc” protection for its earth stations even though they are using substantially less spectrum. Like so much in spectrum policy, this perennial obstacle – underutilized, fallow or warehoused spectrum – must change. We’re moving that rock but it is hard and slow work. Our broad coalition continues to grow, and we are devoting more resources to showing that earth stations can be protected, removing any technical reason for regulators to say no. That said, this is an ongoing effort, which has brought a lot of parties out of
the woodwork. It is a busy space. We are actively engaging the FCC, Capitol Hill, the NTIA, the satellite industry, amongst others, to ensure the Coalition’s proposals can go forward. While there is no defined timeframe, we expect the FCC to act later this year.

CBRS (3.55 to 3.7 GHz) – In the last FCC, the Commission initially offered great hope for our industry, newly opening up an additional 100 MHz of contiguous spectrum in this “experimental band.” To accomplish that, it created a three-tiered, shared access framework which would have allowed our companies to participate – primarily through so-called Priority Access Licenses (PALs), based on small census tracts, which are good for our members wanting to innovate in this new band. Or, so it started that way. Late in 2017, mainly in response to T-Mobile’s requests and its purported concerns about the purported “race to 5G,” the FCC re-opened the proceeding, proposing instead that the PALs be auctioned at Partial Economic Areas. We fought hard against that one. We made a full court press, earning sympathy from the press, other federal agencies, and some third party groups. We put together a coalition including everyone under the sun except the big mobile providers, who agreed to push for census tracts. Almost 200 of you wrote in to the FCC. A handful of WISPs spent more time actively reaching out to their federal representatives, getting a letter written to the agency and some searching questions asked at an FCC oversight hearing. So why didn’t we get census tracts?

First, we were out-funded and out-gunned. With our bandwidth, WISPA could visit a couple dozen congressional offices at key times. Big mobile could visit hundreds of offices multiple times.

Second, WISPA members were divided and muted. A couple of influential lawmakers, that might have been able to turn the tide, polled WISPs in their district. While many said census tracts was all they could live with, a couple said they could live with county-sized licenses. Those politicians chose not to nudge the FCC to go smaller than county PALs. WISPA also put out advocacy tools, including draft member op-eds, that went un- or under-utilized.

Third, we had some key coalition members drop out so as not to offend the FCC Commissioner in charge of this decision.

We ended up with county licenses. But in the face of what the mobile industry was asking for PEAS and the elimination of GAA, that is a huge win. I know it does not seem that way, but we live to fight another day. We have GAA spectrum protected, we have the ability to form consortia to up our likelihood of getting the licenses. And, WISPA was able to secure small business and rural bidding credits.

CBRS is a perfect example of why WISPA needs more DC resources, and more member education and engagement. With both of those things, we increase our likelihood of policy success dramatically

Operational outlook

So enough on policy. I want to touch on a few important, pending operational aspects of WISPA to give you an update.

A main cost driver for many businesses is health care. WISPs are no different. Costs seem only to go up, and access to good providers seems only to go down. Over the years you have shared these concerns with us, so I am looking into whether WISPA can make available an association-provided group health
care plan to our members. We have interest from one major provider, but in order to get an accurate quote, we need information from you. We sent out a brief survey to WISPA members which can help us better understand those needs, as well as the overall viability of such an undertaking. So, please fill out that important questionnaire. It will help us determine what our next steps are in what could potentially be an exciting new member benefit.

And, moving on from health care – we recognize that the association’s technical tools are showing their age. Our webpage hasn’t received a facelift in years, and we are using a backend that is frustrating to say the least---for both members and staff. And while the website still does a great job in helping us communicate to others, allowing members to connect with each, and acting as an important file cabinet of readily available and useful information to help run your businesses, we’ve decided to give it an overhaul and add new functionality so stacks up with what we see and use elsewhere on the Internet. We will get cracking on that after WISPAmerica, so please be on the lookout for these exciting new changes by mid-summer.

We’re also looking to broaden our advocacy and member benefits through innovative partnerships. We’re working on one of those right now with a law school that has an interest in helping entrepreneurs and an interest in the telecom space. Conversations are still very preliminary, but I’m hopeful that a partnership could yield a lot of benefits, particularly for our smallest members.

Finally, WISPA used to do regional shows. Quick, in-person get togethers for WISPs to see and learn from each other that didn’t require several days and a thousand dollars worth of financial commitment. In the era of Facebook and hyperconnectivity, we have lost a lot of that personal touch and I would like to get a chance to see more of you regularly---more than just twice a year. So, in the coming months look for announcements on location and timing for regional WISPA events.

Those are just a couple of things that are ready to share. There are several more initiatives that I’m excited about that are not ready for primetime. You’ll just have to wait for WISPAPALOOZA to hear about those!

Finally, I just want to give a shout-out to our board and all the staff and volunteers who work extremely hard, with many long days, late nights, and more than a few weekends, to make sure that WISPA is doing all that it can to improve the business and regulatory environment for WISPs. They do so many things for us, most of which goes unnoticed. Let’s give them a big round of applause!

In closing, I hope to sit down with many of you over the coming days and visit more of you in the coming months. I want to make sure that this association is working every day to benefit WISPs and hope to hear from you what we are doing right and what we can improve upon.

So long for now and enjoy the show! I hope you learn a lot, make new friends, and take away a greater understanding of how WISPA is working for you!