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Statement from Cliff Lippard, Executive Director, Tennessee Advisory Commission on
Intergovernmental Relations

Speaker's Taskforce on Intergovernmental Affairs

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Chairman Bishop and members of the task force, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Cliff Lippard, and I am the executive director of the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR), one of the few remaining state ACIRs. At the height of the intergovernmental movement, over half of the states had ACIRs, all modeled to some degree on the old US ACIR. In my brief remarks, I will share with you some of the characteristics that have contributed to the prolonged success of TACIR, in the hopes that some of those lessons may be useful to efforts to reconstitute the US ACIR. I firmly believe that in this time of shifting priorities and expectations among the federal, state, tribal, and local governments, and the people that they serve, the reconstitution of the ACIR as a permanent federal forum for the study and deliberation of intergovernmental issues would make an immeasurable contribution toward better government.

First, a little background. TACIR was created by the Tennessee General Assembly in 1978 to monitor the operation of federal-state-local relations in Tennessee and make recommendations for their improvement. I've included information on the composition of our membership as an attachment to my remarks, but in short, the Commission is a permanent, bipartisan body representing the executive and legislative branches of the state, county, and municipal governments, as well as the public. Our members include three statutory appointees—the Comptroller of the treasury and the chairs of our Senate and House Finance Committees. The appointment of most of the local government officials rotates among the Governor, Lieutenant Governor (our Speaker of the Senate), and House Speaker.

The Commission's permanence, its bipartisan makeup, and its broad representation across branches and levels of state government are important strengths of the Commission and have contributed to its successes and survival. The principal state agency committed to the study and deliberation of state and local government issues, it also creates the only formal venue in the state where all players in the state-local intergovernmental arena can meet in a neutral setting. The Commission's research process and its quarterly meetings provide a forum for

other stakeholders—beyond just elected and appointed officials—to air their opinions and concerns. Even if their position is not adopted by the Commission, stakeholders generally see value in being able to state their position to government officials in a public forum. This perceived value goes a long way toward not “burning bridges.”

By serving as a neutral forum informed by professional research, the Commission has been able to foster collaboration among state and local officials, and has been instrumental in achieving a number of government reforms. In the past year alone, the Commission completed studies requested by the legislature or our members on emergency-911 functionality and funding, state prisoners held in county jails, growth policy, boat titling, and local cooperation when approving payments in lieu of tax (PILOT) agreements. These issue-centered studies are completed along with recurring annual studies on local fiscal capacity to fund education and the state’s public infrastructure needs. All of this is accomplished with the assistance of a small staff and a modest budget. I’ve included copies of recaps of our achievements over the two years of the just completed 110th General Assembly in my attachments.

Our work on broadband internet access and adoption provides a good example of the collaborative value provided by the Commission. In preparing our January 2017 report *Broadband Internet Deployment, Availability, and Adoption in Tennessee*, the Commission interviewed or heard testimony from a broad range of federal, state, and local officials, as well as from local utility cooperatives, business interests, and community groups. The Commission used this input to prepare a series of recommendations that focused on supporting and coordinating existing broadband initiatives and on addressing any remaining coverage and adoption gaps by working with the private sector—both for-profit and non-profit—to fill remaining gaps in the manner least costly to taxpayers and without expanding the size of government. These recommendations were widely adopted by the Governor in his Tennessee Broadband Accessibility Act, which passed the General Assembly in 2017.

In closing, I will add that other factors that have contributed to our success include the active participation of our leadership and members. I’ll also add that an important limitation of the Commission is that the same structure that supports bipartisan collaboration within and across levels of government also functionally limits the issues it studies to those that are technical and pragmatic. It is unlikely the Commission could reach consensus on issues with strong ideological divides. And even if it did, taking what could appear to be partisan positions would undercut the perceived neutrality of the Commission and reduce its effectiveness. Similarly, because many of the Commission’s recommendations are compromises—not just partisan compromises but also compromises between the state and its local governments, between city and county governments, or between large and small local governments—the changes endorsed by the Commission tend to be incremental rather than sweeping.