Remarks of Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn (as prepared)
Regional Smart Cities Forum
Washington, DC
February 15, 2018

Thank you, Rhonda. As this audience knows well, cities and regions that make the most out of intelligent transportation systems, the Internet-of-Things, and big data analytics, can replace failing infrastructure, cut costs, and generate new revenue, while dramatically improving the lives of their residents.

One of my top priorities, as an FCC Commissioner, is promoting the deployment and adoption of broadband – essential tools in the 21st century. The benefits of broadband-enabled technologies are vast, but the challenges, particularly for the economically-disadvantaged, are many. Those unable to benefit and are left behind, may never be able to catch up. But I believe, that with the right balance of smart, targeted FCC policies, public-public, public-private and private-private partnerships, communities currently on the wrong side of the digital and opportunities divide, can be positioned for success.

This will not happen, by being narrowly fixated on infrastructure builds. It must include a mix of broadband access, digital literacy and affordability programs. The FCC currently defines broadband as 25 megabits per second download and 3 megabits per second upload. But there are 34 million Americans, without access to these speeds.

That is why we worked hard at reforming our universal service programs, so all Americans will one day have access to advanced broadband services. That is why over the past seven years, we have overhauled our high cost program that subsidizes broadband deployment in hard to serve rural areas. And that universal service principle, is exactly the policy this audience is seeking to promote. For instance, when it comes to intelligent transportation systems, if cities deploy spectrum and assets to support these systems, they could at the same time, supply those communities with high rates of diabetes and obesity, and low rates of access to broadband, with a cost-effective transportation infrastructure, which enables patients to get back and forth to medical facilities for care.

But while the high cost fund is closing the digital gap in rural communities, too many urban communities lack access. That is why the FCC should create more incentives for companies to deploy service over fixed and mobile wireless networks to undercapitalized communities. One way we can do this, is by making wireless spectrum available through auctions. It can cost tens of millions of dollars to acquire one license to serve an area the size of Cincinnati, Denver, or New York City. But the FCC does not require wireless companies to serve 100 percent of those license areas. This ultimately results in, what I refer to as "donut holes" -- areas where a licensed wireless company chooses not to serve, areas where too often, most of the residents, live below the poverty line.

But the FCC has an opportunity, in a pending proceeding, to allocate spectrum in the 3.5 GHz band, that could encourage companies to deploy fixed wireless and mobile networks to serve those donut holes. In 2015, the FCC designed licenses that are smaller in geographic size, and should be less expensive than traditional wireless licenses. They are called Priority Access Licenses, or PALs, designed to serve an area that is the size of a census tract.

Smaller sizes of PALs, improve the possibility that companies of any size can provide wireless service to communities of need, both urban and rural. But the current proposal, which increases the size of PALs, will make it more difficult to achieve that result. I encourage you to weigh in, if you believe that communities large and small deserve more opportunities when it comes to connectivity.

Deployment is just one part of the broadband equation, and filling a donut hole with wireless service or connecting a house to fiber, does not automatically mean that service is available. What if the monthly cost is too high? What if residents do not have a computer or mobile device? What if they do not see the relevance of broadband in their lives? The FCC's Lifeline program is an attempt to close that gap. E-Rate seeks to close the gap. And those schools and libraries that offer digital literacy programs at times when the community can access them, can close the gap. But strangling the Lifeline program as is currently proposed by the FCC majority, will ensure that those who cannot afford service, will remain without.

So, I come today voicing strong support, for smart cities, smart regional plans, and smart infrastructure builds. But just what does success look like? When every citizen benefits from the effort. The only real way for us to realize this, is if the FCC's policies for broadband deployment and adoption, are vigilant, inclusive, and demanding. Thank you.