



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement as Prepared For Delivery -- *February 22, 2011*
Puerto Rico Bridge Initiative Inauguration
“ARRA – Expanding Broadband and Investing in Puerto Rico”

Good morning. *Buenos días a todos.*

I want to begin by thanking Carlo Marazzi, Karen Larson, and Zeide Rojas for inviting me to speak today. They and others at Critical Hub Networks had the vision to create the Puerto Rico Bridge Initiative and to seek the available federal funding to make this vision a reality. I am so pleased to be here today to help inaugurate this important project.

Before I discuss how broadband fits into Puerto Rico’s future, I want to step back briefly and provide some context for the funding that is financing this project. In early 2009, our nation was facing one of its greatest challenges since the Great Depression. Unemployment was at unacceptably high levels, the stock market had lost one-third of its value, and our nation’s infrastructure—both physical and virtual—was lacking.

In February 2009, Congress passed and the President signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, known as ARRA. In enacting this law, the President and Congress sought to put our nation back to work. But ARRA did much more than to provide jobs to our nation’s unemployed workers. It also laid the groundwork for our nation’s long-term success by making important investments in our people and in the infrastructure that is necessary for future economic prosperity.

I am pleased that, after much effort, we succeeded in making sure that nearly all of ARRA’s provisions applied to Puerto Rico. In total, the Island will receive nearly \$7 billion dollars under ARRA. This funding has served as a lifeline for Puerto Rico’s struggling economy, preventing a difficult situation from becoming far worse. The billions of dollars in ARRA funding have been used, for example, to help Island schools and students, to provide food and housing assistance to our most vulnerable citizens, to construct roads and bridges, to retrain unemployed workers, and to improve the quality of drinking water.

Under ARRA, residents of Puerto Rico were even included in certain tax credit programs from which we are usually excluded. ARRA also temporarily increased federal funding for Puerto Rico’s Medicaid program by 30%, which was—at the time—the single largest increase in the Island’s history. And, as we all know, ARRA provided grants to increase broadband access and broadband adoption across the nation.

You may be asking yourself why I am mentioning all of these benefits. After all: aren’t we here to celebrate just one discrete aspect of the Recovery Act—the broadband grants that are funding the Bridge Initiative? Well, the reason I mention all of these components of ARRA is because each one of them is connected to our nation’s ability to “win the future,” to adopt President Obama’s eloquent phrase.

We will not prepare our students for the jobs of the 21st century if we do not invest in our Island's schools. We will not persuade multi-national corporations to locate their workforce in the United States if we do not fix our crumbling roads and bridges, and if we do not retrain our workers with the skills they need to fill high-quality jobs. In short, we will not out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world if we do not invest in our people and in the infrastructure that brings people and business together.

That is why the Puerto Rico Bridge Initiative is so important. For Puerto Rico to fully participate in the global economy, residents and businesses on the Island must have fast and affordable access to the internet. Without this access, we will never realize the full potential of our workforce: we will never light the spark in the mind of a student from our Island's rural interior because he or she is unable to explore the internet. We will lose the business that is considering locating its new headquarters in Puerto Rico but decides not to do so because it doubts it can operate efficiently with slow internet connectivity. We will fail to provide the best medical care possible because doctors and hospitals cannot access their patients' electronic health records in an efficient manner. Thus, broadband service is not an end in itself but a pathway that leads to more educational opportunities, more businesses and jobs, and higher-quality medical care.

For too long, Puerto Rico has lagged behind the rest of the United States when it comes to telecommunications services. A recent report published by the Communications Workers of America lists Puerto Rico as having slower download speeds than all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Last year, the FCC's Sixth Broadband Deployment Report found that *no one* in Puerto Rico has access to high-speed broadband under the FCC's new benchmark, and less than 40% of Island households have access to any type of broadband service. This means one-sixth of all unserved Americans reside in Puerto Rico.

Let me be clear: these statistics are unacceptable. Broadband is too important for the future of Puerto Rico for us to accept the status quo. All of us gathered here today must do everything in our power to expand broadband access across the entire Island.

The Puerto Rico Bridge Initiative represents a significant step forward in achieving our goal of fast and affordable broadband access for all individuals and companies in Puerto Rico. I was pleased to support Critical Hub's application for funding under ARRA and am thrilled that the project was awarded nearly \$26 million dollars by the federal government.

As Carlo just explained, once this underwater fiber-optic "bridge" between Florida and Puerto Rico is complete, broadband speed on the Island will increase and the cost of providing these services will decrease. Thus, the project will not only put broadband within reach of many people on the Island who currently do not have it, but will also spur increased demand for these services by the public and private sectors, multiplying the economic growth generated by the project.

Thank you again for inviting me to the inauguration of the Bridge Initiative. I look forward to continuing to work with you to expand broadband access in Puerto Rico. Thank you.