



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

2021 APR 30 AM 8:57

CLERK OF THE BOARD
OF SUPERVISORS

COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: May 5, 2021

18

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

BRIDGING THE RURAL DIGITAL DIVIDE: SR-67 MICROTRENCHING AND FIBER DEPLOYMENT (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has both highlighted and exacerbated the digital divide between served and underserved communities and exposed the service deficiencies in much of the rural back country. Access to affordable high-speed internet has never been so essential for families and it is likely to become even more so in the future. The inequitable distribution of broadband access is, therefore, a significant and growing social and economic issue.

Though the County's effective distribution of COVID-19 vaccines has brought guarded hope for a return to normalcy—with public schools returning to in-person instruction and restrictions easing for fully vaccinated individuals—the digital divide remains, and many of the recent changes—including increasing adoption of remote work and learning, remote government services, and telemedicine—are likely to continue beyond the pandemic. Furthermore, the rapid advance of technology—including innovations like 5G, smart grids, Intelligent Transportation Systems, and driverless vehicles—are significantly increasing the importance of fiber-optic data transmission.

Recognizing these factors, the County has an historic opportunity to partner with Caltrans and SANDAG to expand its own fiber optic network and increase access in the unincorporated area to affordable, high-speed internet service opportunities. Caltrans is currently preparing to put its \$24.3 million SR-67 Pavement Rehabilitation Project out for bid. Funded through Senate Bill 1 (Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017), the SR-67 Project will resurface an 18-mile stretch of SR-67 from Lakeside to Ramona. Caltrans and SANDAG have proposed to collaborate with San Diego County to take advantage of the road work by investing an additional \$6-7 million to microtrench concurrently with the pavement rehabilitation and lay multiple conduits, to accommodate County fiber and allow for future leasing by broadband service providers.

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The County of San Diego stands to obtain significant return on its portion of the overall investment. The additional 18 miles of fiber will enable the County to implement Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) improvements into the SR-67 corridor itself, including sensors, information for emergency services, smart intersections, and dynamic lane management and electronic signage. It can also add resilience, redundancy, and remote control to the County's emergency and fire response and evacuation management system. The additional fiber will integrate Ramona and communities beyond into the urban fiber optic system, and improve digital connectivity at County facilities, including parks and libraries.

The project also offers significant social and economic equity benefits, and SANDAG has identified it for inclusion in the Regional Digital Equity Strategy and Action Plan they are currently developing. The availability of conduit for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to lay their own fiber can integrate many communities previously excluded from broadband access. 225,000 county residents live within 5 miles of the SR-67 corridor, nearly 30% of whom are low-income and 38% minorities - many of whom have been denied adequate access to remote work, learning, and telehealth opportunities. Connecting Ramona to the regional fiber optic network is also an important step toward integrating San Diego's tribal nations, like Barona, Mesa Grande, and Santa Ysabel.

The County anticipates substantial federal and state financial assistance will be available to fund efforts to address the digital divide. This local project offers the opportunity to extend digital access to thousands of residents of the unincorporated area and enable the County to assist in securing additional digital services for our residents.

The urgency of this action is necessitated by the unique opportunity to piggy-back on previously budgeted and approved Caltrans work and to achieve substantial cost-sharing with Caltrans and SANDAG. This requires the immediate revision of the scope of work of the current SR-67 project. In order to proceed, Caltrans needs a Letter of Commitment from the County of San Diego prior to the May 6th hearing of the California Transportation Committee (CTC), which will enable them to expand the scope prior to putting it out for bid at the CTC's May 13th meeting.

Given that collaborating with Caltrans and SANDAG to add microtrenching, conduit, and County fiber to the existing SR-67 Pavement Rehabilitation Project would achieve substantial benefits for the County and its residents, while reducing overall costs, reducing the county's share of costs, and avoiding additional closures of the SR-67 corridor, this letter instructs the Chief Administrative Office to submit a letter to SANDAG and Caltrans indicating the commitment of funds of up to \$1.4million in eligible funding for the Bridging the Digital Divide SR-67 Fiber Project and to seek additional federal, state, and grant funding for this and other opportunities to increase broadband connectivity in our County.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

SUPERVISOR JOEL ANDERSON AND SUPERVISOR TERRA LAWSON-REMER

1. Find that the proposed project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) as specified under Section 15301 of the CEQA Guidelines because the proposed

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action involves minor alterations of existing public facilities relating to resulting in negligible or no expansion of existing or former use.

2. Direct the Chief Administrative Office (CAO) to submit a letter to SANDAG and Caltrans indicating the commitment of funds of up to \$1.4M in eligible funding for the Bridging the Digital Divide SR-67 Fiber Project and include these costs in the framework for ARPA spending.
3. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to seek federal, state, and grant funding to increase broadband/connectivity in our communities.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for this request are not included in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021-22 CAO Recommended Operational Plan in the Department of Public Works (DPW). Funding source will be the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) funds. If the costs for the fiber deployment are unallowable expenses for ARPA, staff will return to propose alternative funding. If approved, the County's commitment for this project is up to \$1.4 million and will be referred to the budget for consideration during the FY 2021-22 budget deliberations and adoption.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has both highlighted and exacerbated the digital divide between served and underserved communities and exposed the service deficiencies in much of the rural back country. Access to affordable high-speed internet has never been so essential for families and it is likely to become even more so in the future. Internet connectivity has become a public utility as vital to contemporary life as electricity, telephone, road, and rail, and its inequitable distribution is therefore a significant and growing social and economic issue.

There is broad national recognition of this inequity and commitment at all levels of government to invest in remedying it. In August of 2020, Governor Newsom issued Executive Order N-73-20, which directs all state agencies to "to pursue a minimum broadband speed goal of 100 megabits per second download speed to guide infrastructure investments and program implementation to benefit all Californians." On January 22nd of this year, the SANDAG Board passed and adopted Resolution No. 2021-09, which supports the Governor's order and "declares bridging the digital divide is integral to developing a healthy, resilient, and economically competitive region." SANDAG Board Resolution 2021-09. On March 31st, President Joe Biden committed \$100 billion to close the digital divide as part of his proposed \$2.25 trillion American Jobs Plan. In his first address to Congress, on April 21st, he announced that Vice President Kamala Harris would lead the Administration's effort to close the digital divide, highlighting its importance to his agenda. There are, therefore, firm grounds for anticipating state and federal mandates and support for dramatically improving broadband access to communities traditional denied adequate services.

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Microtrenching offers substantial cost-savings vis-a-vis traditional trenching and has become increasingly popular nationwide as the U.S. Department of Transportation and other transportation agencies have adopted 'Dig Once/Dig Smart' polices that encourage low-cost, low-disruption installations of digital and other amenities concurrently with transportation projects. Spurred in part by Assembly Bill 1549, which mandated Caltrans to notify and collaborate with local governments, nonprofits, and broadband service providers to facilitate the installation of broadband conduit in conjunction with transportation projects, Caltrans is eager to take advantage of the current opportunity to obtain digital co-benefits from its SR-67 Project.

The County of San Diego stands to obtain significant return on its portion of the overall investment. The additional 18 miles of fiber will enable the County to implement Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) improvements into the SR-67 corridor itself, including sensors, information for emergency services, smart intersections, and dynamic lane management and electronic signage. It can also add resilience, redundancy, and remote control to the County's emergency and fire response and evacuation management system. The additional fiber will also integrate Ramona and communities beyond into the urban fiber optic system, and improve digital connectivity at County facilities, including parks and libraries.

The project also offers significant social and economic equity benefits. The availability of conduit for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to lay their own fiber can integrate many communities previously excluded from broadband access. 225,000 county residents live within 5 miles of the SR-67 corridor, nearly 30% of whom are low-income and 38% minorities- who have been denied adequate access to remote work, learning, recreation, telehealth, and government services. Connecting Ramona to the regional fiber optic network is also an important step toward integrating San Diego's tribal nations, like Barona, Mesa Grande, and Santa Ysabel.

The urgency of this instruction is necessitated by the unique opportunity to piggy-back on previously budgeted and approved Caltrans work and to achieve substantial cost-sharing with Caltrans and SANDAG. This requires the immediate revision of the scope of work of the current SR-67 Project. In order to proceed, Caltrans needs a Letter of Commitment from the County of San Diego prior to the May 6th hearing of the California Transportation Committee (CTC), which will enable them to expand the scope prior to putting it out for bid at the CTC's May 13th meeting. Finally, Caltrans, SANDAG, and the County must have a funding agreement prior to bid opening on May 26th. The benefit of this urgency, however, is that the SR-67 Pavement Rehabilitation Project will be completed, potentially with County and ISP-leasable conduit, by mid-November of this year.

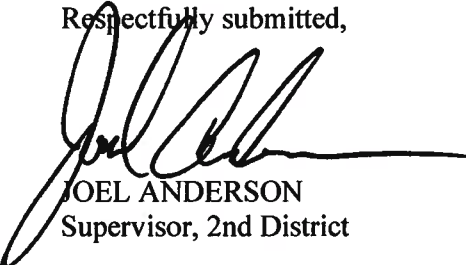
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Given that collaborating with Caltrans and SANDAG to add microtrenching, County and privately leasable conduit, and County fiber to the existing SR-67 Pavement Rehabilitation Project would achieve substantial benefits for the County and its residents, while reducing overall costs, reducing the county's share of costs, and avoiding additional closures of the SR-67 corridor, this letter therefore instructs the Chief Administrative Office to submit a letter to SANDAG and Caltrans indicating the commitment of funds of up to \$1.4million in eligible funding for the Bridging the Digital Divide SR-67 Fiber Project and to seek additional federal, state, and grant funding for this and other opportunities to increase broadband connectivity in our county.

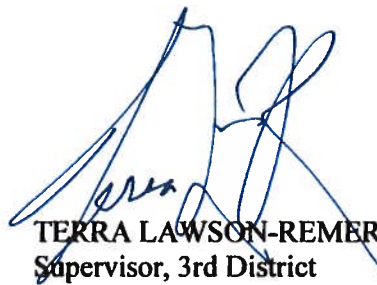
LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed action to commit funds to the SR-67 Fiber Project, in collaboration with the California Department of Transportation (CALTRANS) and San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), supports the Sustainable Environments/Thriving Strategic Initiative in the County of San Diego's 2021-2026 Strategic Plan by improving public digital infrastructure, regional transportation management, and internet access for residents of the unincorporated county.

Respectfully submitted,



JOEL ANDERSON
Supervisor, 2nd District



TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, 3rd District

ATTACHMENT(S)

N/A

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AGENDA ITEM INFORMATION SHEET

REQUIRES FOUR VOTES: Yes No

WRITTEN DISCLOSURE PER COUNTY CHARTER SECTION 1000.1 REQUIRED

 Yes No

PREVIOUS RELEVANT BOARD ACTIONS:

N/A

BOARD POLICIES APPLICABLE:

N/A

BOARD POLICY STATEMENTS:

N/A

MANDATORY COMPLIANCE:

N/A

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