



TERRA LAWSON-REMER

VICE-CHAIR

**SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: January 10, 2024

05

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

INCREASING LOCAL BROADBAND CAPACITY BY IDENTIFYING WAYS TO STREAMLINE AND EXPEDITE NEW BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

Throughout San Diego County there are communities that lack access to affordable and reliable Broadband high-speed internet. This digital divide has disproportionately impacted people of color, households that are lower-income, and those that are living in unincorporated and rural areas.

The Covid-19 pandemic only highlighted the need for digital equity in these unserved and underserved areas. In a world that has increasingly become dependent on technology and data, having reliable internet has become an integral and essential part of life. San Diegans need to remain connected and engaged digitally, to reliably attend school, work remotely, access healthcare, and connect with family and friends.

There was an unprecedented level of government funding through the Federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Funding (BIL) that became available for broadband investment during the pandemic which presented a substantial opportunity to address gaps and improve access in the unincorporated areas of our County. While these federal dollars have primarily been allocated at this time, programs like the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program have a slower rollout period which differs per state. BEAD funds are monies set aside to build Broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved communities, however, a condition of receiving those funds is that projects must be completed in 18 to 24 months if the project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

The County currently has a Self-Certification program in place for faster timelines as it relates to Broadband project maintenance needs if a provider opts into the County's program annually. This

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allows for registered professionals to take responsibility for certifying a project’s compliance with building codes, standards, and ordinances.

However, the County has a prime opportunity to identify ways to speed up timelines for new Broadband projects and help the industry meet the deadlines of the various funding programs that are being rolled out nationwide. Ultimately, increasing access to internet service for our communities across the region.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

VICE-CHAIR TERRA LAWSON-REMER

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to engage with Internet Service Providers and regional broadband stakeholders to develop options to streamline processes and expedite the review and approval of new broadband related projects, including potential budgetary costs and funding sources.
2. Report back to the Board of Supervisors within 120 days with options to expedite review and streamline new Broadband infrastructure projects, including recommendations for Board action.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Access to quality Broadband is imperative for our local San Diego families. It helps connect individuals to career opportunities, educational resources, and communication technology. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the digital divide between served, and low-income and underserved communities, highlighting the essential need for all to have access to efficient Broadband networks. This item will help to expedite Broadband projects and provide faster and more efficient internet service to areas that have historically had challenges receiving them.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Efforts to promote the development of Broadband networks in areas that are unserved or underserved can result in improved connectivity for the home and businesses. This improved access to the internet can help provide enhanced educational resources, hybrid or remote career options, and better remote communication technology. Ultimately, this has the potential to reduce vehicle miles traveled and create less greenhouse gas emissions by providing less need to travel for Broadband access or its associated benefits.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with these recommendations. There may be fiscal impacts associated with future recommendations related to this action. Any such recommendations would return back for consideration and approval by the Board of Supervisors. Upon return by staff, funding for future costs will need to be identified by the department and will proceed once identified. At this time, there will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years.

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BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

Streamlining Broadband deployment will be of great benefit to the general public as well as for businesses that are involved in the Broadband deployment process, helping to create jobs and economic growth. Increased access to Broadband will also benefit local businesses by providing a fast, reliable connection to the internet and internet marketplace.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

Throughout San Diego County there are communities that lack access to affordable and reliable Broadband high-speed internet. The County of San Diego's (County's) Comprehensive Broadband Plan helped to identify many of the census tracts that are considered to be "internet deserts." This digital divide has disproportionately impacted people of color, households that are lower-income, and those that are living in unincorporated and rural areas. While having reliable internet has become an integral and essential part of life, there are barriers to achieving digital equity and universal access. The region has a significant opportunity to invest in broadband infrastructure to meet the current and future needs of San Diegans, getting them connected and engaged digitally so that they can reliably access workforce, healthcare, and social resources.

With the passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) in 2021, \$42.5 billion in funding was allocated for the deployment of last-mile broadband connectivity to every unserved and underserved household and business across the United States. \$1.86 billion in funding from the BIL was dedicated to the State of California through the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program. This program is being implemented in California by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). As part of requirements for this program, once funding has been allocated to a Broadband project, it must be completed within 18 to 24 months if the project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

The CPUC's BEAD five-year action plan has identified permitting timelines as the main barrier to implementing broadband infrastructure with these funds and states, "Given the size of the State and the multiple permitting entities from which grantees will need to gain approval, permitting for infrastructure projects will represent a major challenge."

Broadband project permitting issues can be similar to other permitting delays, with months of plan review, comments and revisions prior to project approval. These delays can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and increase the risk that inflation will drive up the costs of building materials and labor.

Technology is changing at a rapid rate and Broadband networks are constantly being updated to meet the growing need for higher internet speeds for jobs, communication devices, and other modern appliances that require internet connectivity. While the County currently has a Self-Certification program in place for faster timelines as it relates to Broadband project maintenance needs if a provider opts into the County's program annually, it has a prime opportunity to identify ways to speed up timelines for new Broadband projects and help the industry meet the deadlines

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of the various funding programs that are being rolled out nationwide. Ultimately, increasing access to internet service for our communities across the region.

Today's action would direct the Chief Administrative Officer to engage with Internet Service Providers and regional broadband stakeholders to develop options to streamline processes and expedite the review and approval of new broadband related projects. With these actions, we can help to ensure that these much-needed broadband projects will meet the timeline requirements of the BEAD and be better able to pursue other state and federal funding programs that will help expand Broadband connectivity for our local communities.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed actions support the Sustainability, Equity, Empower, Community, and Justice Strategic Initiatives within the County of San Diego's 2024-2029 Strategic Plan by examining and utilizing policies and specific actions to support Broadband deployment to meet the needs of the unserved and underserved communities in the region.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Terra Lawson-Remer', with a stylized flourish at the end.

TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, Third District

ATTACHMENT(S)

N/A