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**ESTABLISHING PATHWAYS TO EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HIGH SPEED
INTERNET AND BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the deep inequities that run through our communities. These inequities range from access to care and disproportionate health outcomes, to access to the high-speed broadband internet services needed to telework and to provide opportunities for distance learning while the Safer at Home Health Officer Orders are in place.

The pandemic has emphasized the importance of access to high-speed broadband internet and related resources as an essential means to access health services, education, economic resources, and job opportunities. The availability of broadband access and the devices to use it are critical to County residents as many jobs and industries are making a shift to virtual operations in order to maintain local business operations, public services, and distance education for students.

The pandemic has highlighted the digital divide that exists between those that have access to broadband and technology and those that do not. As many have transitioned to working from home and distance learning, the need for affordable, reliable telecommunications services and resources is now more important than ever.

According to a study by the USC Annenberg School of Communications, nearly 1.5 million K-12 students in Los Angeles County have left in-person classrooms and attend classes virtually. The study also found that about 1 in 4 families with school-age children in Los Angeles County do not have the resources necessary for distance learning and these students are likely to fall behind in education during the pandemic. Many of the families without resources reside in disadvantaged or underserved communities.

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According to the American Community Survey Data for Los Angeles County, approximately 283,000 households do not have internet access. A survey by the Los Angeles Times and the California Department of Education described the impact of the digital divide and the lack of digital inclusivity. Results showed that 97% of households in high-income areas had internet access and 87% had a computer at home; while only 65% of low-income areas had internet access and 51% had a computer at home.

In addition, one of the few silver linings of the impact of the pandemic, has been the adaptation to technological solutions to address the inability to meet in-person. This includes the rapid use and integration of telehealth as an essential way to provide access to health care, especially for our most vulnerable populations. The rise of telehealth may be solution to individuals that cannot take time off from work or their other responsibilities to attend to their health needs.

During the COVID-19 crisis, funding was provided by both the public and private sectors to provide laptop computers and other devices to those in need; however, it quickly became apparent that unless connectivity was available, the devices were not as useful as intended. Access to connectivity, digital literacy, and the devices are essential components to closing the digital divide and ensuring digital inclusion for all.

The County currently provides public Wi-Fi access at many facilities, including parks, libraries, and community/senior centers. The County also recently launched a Wi-Fi Locator tool to help residents find and stay connected through free, local Wi-Fi.

However, these are temporary solutions and ultimately the County needs to focus on major, regional, telecommunications infrastructure, including collaborating with the telecommunications industry to support development of “best in class” infrastructure to provide connectivity and services, especially in underserved rural communities.

One area of opportunity is to streamline the permitting of high-speed internet infrastructure and to ensure the County’s permitting systems are in line with best practices. Current permitting ranges from ministerial encroachment permits for infrastructure within the public right-of-way, to discretionary Conditional Use Permits (CUP) for a traditional cell site located on private property or within public right-of-way.

Recently, the Department of Regional Planning, streamlined permitting for small cell wireless facilities in the unincorporated areas of the County by allowing them to be reviewed through Zoning Conformance Review procedure instead of the previously required CUP, considerably reducing the review cost and processing time. Continuing to explore best practices and learn from the experiences of local jurisdictions, such as the City of Long Beach, will help the County develop solutions to the streamlined and expedited permitting of such infrastructure.

The County has a unique opportunity to provide leadership in digital innovation by deploying advanced telecommunications networks and ensuring digital inclusion in the communities it serves. This may include updating policies, procedures, or ordinances, to incentivize the industry and provide consistent guidelines to standardize the process, while ensuring new installations meet the needs of residents and businesses.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Department of Public Works, in coordination with the Department of Regional Planning and County Counsel, to collaborate with public and private sector partners, including broadband, fiber, and cellular technology companies in the telecommunications industry, through *Infrastructure LA* and report back in 90 days, with a plan to:

1. Develop best practices for streamlining the permitting of high-speed broadband internet infrastructure, including modeling the County's practices after best practices learned from the City of Long Beach;
2. Explore public and private partnerships and develop recommendations for incentives, including leveraging local, state, and federal grant opportunities, to spur the deployment of broadband infrastructure in historically underserved and rural communities;
3. Develop a database and geographic information system (GIS) mapping viewer to catalogue and lay out major existing broadband infrastructure countywide to serve as the basis for a future needs assessment;
4. Explore potential revisions or additions to the County's General Plan to ensure unincorporated areas have sufficient access to high-speed internet;
5. Explore innovative, short-term and long-term strategies to provide free or low-cost high-speed internet and related devices to disadvantaged communities; and
6. Explore innovative strategies and permitting fee structures to enable the timely review of permit applications for high-speed broadband infrastructure

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