

MOTION BY SUPERVISOR HOLLY J. MITCHELL

August 10, 2021

ACCELERATING EFFORTS TO CRUSH THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 crisis in poorer, nonwhite communities should put to rest any meaningful debate about whether access to the internet is a civil rights issue. Across Los Angeles and California, far too many of our seniors, students, and families experienced the failures of the existing broadband market to deliver fast, reliable, and affordable internet service. These failures were particularly pronounced in communities of color and came at a time when our communities needed reliable internet service more than ever – to attend school, access social services, or sign up to receive a vaccine.

While connecting our rural communities is, deservedly, receiving significant attention right now; we must be careful not to let this focus result in urban communities being left behind. Cities cannot continue to rely on only the free market – a market that has failed, again and again, to provide fast, reliable and affordable broadband connectivity to communities that are disproportionately composed of people color and those earning lower incomes.

Closing the digital divide and providing affordable and reliable internet services for all involves extending infrastructure to both rural Los Angeles County (County), and to the millions of urban families who live in areas without high-speed, reliable, affordable internet service.

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The infrastructure challenge is different in urban areas than in rural ones, but both will require public investments in middle-mile infrastructure and last-mile connections. Unlike the rural broadband challenge, connecting urban families through a public, open-access broadband network need not require laying an extensive amount of fiber-optic cable. In most urban areas, telecommunication companies, cities, and the County already have vast networks fiber and cable. Extending these networks to deliver fast, reliable, and affordable broadband services to unserved and underserved households, most of them in low-income neighborhoods and often home to families of color, will require both public and private investments, and public-private partnerships to establish a more robust and healthy market for broadband services.

In the County's Second Supervisorial District alone, over 20% of households do not have a broadband connection; the vast majority of those because they cannot afford it. Broadband services must be seen as a utility as essential as water and electricity, one that is required to fully participate in the modern world. Crushing the digital divide will require targeting public dollars for public good, allowing local governments to drive solutions to their own infrastructure needs. It will also require a granular level of data to understand – block by block – the quality and cost of various broadband infrastructure options, the barriers to entry for existing and new service providers, and the reasons households remain unconnected. This granular data is central to position the County to take advantage of newly available State and Federal resources to eliminate the digital divide. Our public investments must solve not only broadband infrastructure gaps, the adoption gap, but also the utilization gap and the economic opportunity gap to truly achieve digital equity.

The recent approval of funding for a \$6 billion multi-year State investment in broadband infrastructure, including State-owned, open-access middle-mile infrastructure, funding for counties to build last-mile infrastructure, and a financing mechanism for counties, cities, and other entities working on behalf of the public good to build

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infrastructure, plus the potential for a large Federal infrastructure stimulus package with funding for infrastructure, affordability, and literacy solutions, presents a major opportunity to crush the digital divide. The deployment of this funding must be a community-led process supported by the County and informed by successful public and public-private models. County departments must be coordinated and aligned to leverage our public resources and be prepared with shovel-ready planning to marshal equitable resources to the communities most in need.

I THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

1. Direct the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and her Legislative Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations Division to work directly with relevant Los Angeles County (County) departments to continue to advocate in support of direct, needs-based allocation of State and Federal broadband infrastructure funding, prioritizing last mile and middle mile solutions for highly disconnected geographic areas in the County. The advocacy should center around affordability of individual subscriptions for households at appropriate connection speeds.
2. Instruct the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to dedicate up to \$500,000 in American Rescue Plan funds currently allocated to Delete the Divide to within 60 days, hire a consultant to provide written block-by-block financial modeling to close the digital divide in demonstration neighborhoods in the County. The consultant's work should be part of an effort to understand barriers to broadband service and affordability in the County and provide recommendations on a feasible financial model for a public private partnership to solve the digital divide. Neighborhoods should be identified based on existing data related to access to Broadband services, prioritized in the highest needs communities and should reflect a diversity of population density. Consultant findings should align with the requirements and parameters of new state and

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federal funding opportunities and include a list of priority geographical areas to target to maximize available funding.

3. Direct the County's Chief Information Officer, in concert with the CEO, Director of ISD, and the Director of the Department of Public Works, to report back in writing in 120 days with an implementation plan to close the digital divide based on the consultant recommendations.

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