

California's 'broadband for all' law needs to help poorer areas that lack fast internet

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August 29, 2021

Last year, amid school closures and the COVID-19 pandemic, a photo of two young California students completing their schoolwork in a Taco Bell parking lot rocked not only the Golden State but the nation.

How could it be that in the most technologically advanced state, the fifth-largest economy in the world, schoolchildren would have to go to a fast-food restaurant because they did not have a sufficient internet connection at home?

The pandemic peeled back the curtain to reveal the “digital divide.” The lack of broadband in California communities is far reaching, impacting individuals, learning opportunities, commerce, and equity.

Far too many Californians, and those in the Coachella Valley specifically, remain “unserved,” meaning high-speed internet service just isn’t available at their home.

Across Riverside County, almost 20,000 households lack access to broadband internet at any speed. Communities such as Sky Valley have more than 50% of residents unserved by broadband speeds, while in Thermal it’s 83%.

Even farther east in the county, Blythe, Mesa Verde and Desert Center have 50%, 90% and 100%, respectively, of their residents unserved.

These communities span the valley and the county, but most are similar in terms of race, socioeconomic status and historically getting a lack of resources. Over time, these disparities and imbalanced infrastructure will have negative effects on our competitiveness as a region.

Thanks to bi-partisan support and legislators — like our own Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia — we have passed Senate Bill 156, a historic \$6 billion investment into broadband infrastructure.

What does this mean for the students who have to complete their homework or attend online classes in commercial parking lots and coffee shops? How will \$6 billion be used to create change? We need our legislators to keep working together; to effectively invest these funds into our most disconnected communities; and to give our local cities the ability to plan future development without broadband challenges.

In short, the work is not done.

Important improvements still need to be made to SB 156 to prevent these dollars from going to waste. Most significantly, the legislature must act quickly to make clear that funding for “middle mile” broadband infrastructure will go first to unserved households and second to ensuring we can streamline the process for utilities to build out broadband networks.

Despite the claim that SB 156 will bring internet service to every California resident, the legislation does not clearly prioritize unserved communities, like ours here in the Coachella Valley.

Without guaranteeing these communities will come first, dollars for constructing certain broadband infrastructure could be allocated toward localities that already have access to high-speed internet. Any policy changes must clearly focus on connecting areas of the state that are underserved. That way, we know the resources and infrastructure will serve the people who need it most.

Second, we need to streamline the process by which we distribute funds for broadband investment. Far too often, there are antiquated processes, creating opportunity costs and delays. We need to improve the California Advanced Services Fund (CASF) which could otherwise cause delays and confusion for both the state and internet providers who seek to build out networks. Let’s see the legislature cut unnecessary processes to simplify and speed up applications, progress and the deployment of broadband to underserved communities.

Every California resident can and should have access to the internet regardless of location or income. The internet is not only key to connecting those who are disconnected, but it is the linchpin to future economic growth.

Internet connectivity has become the hub of the economy and society today. Education, healthcare, work, and civic life are all dependent on internet access. For Coachella Valley families and residents to build up their communities and support their kids and small businesses, internet access is necessary.

Today, we face an extraordinary opportunity to connect every Californian to the internet. We agree that the investments need to be made and we have the funding and resources. With a few small adjustments to California’s broadband policy, SB 156, we can truly bring every part of this state, including Coachella Valley, into the future, and make certain no child is doing homework at a fast-food restaurant again.