



Southern California Association of Governments
Remote Participation Only
February 4, 2021

To: Community
Economic & Human Development Committee (CEHD)
Energy & Environment Committee (EEC)
Transportation Committee (TC)
Regional Council (RC)

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S
APPROVAL**

From: Roland Ok, Program Manager II,
(213) 236-1819, ok@scag.ca.gov

Subject: Resolution for SCAG to Bridge the Digital Divide in
Underserved Communities

RECOMMENDED ACTION FOR RC:

Adopt Resolution 21-629-2 to establish a Broadband Action Plan to assist in bridging the digital divide.

RECOMMENDED ACTION FOR CEHD, EEC AND TC:

Receive and File

STRATEGIC PLAN:

This item supports the following Strategic Plan Goal 1: Produce innovative solutions that improve the quality of life for Southern Californians.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the digital divide in underserved communities, including communities of color, rural communities and senior citizens, more apparent as work, commerce, health and other economic services have moved online. Residents in underserved communities are struggling to participate in the digital landscape as broadband services are unavailable to them due to lack of affordability or infrastructure. As such, there is a need to expedite broadband infrastructure deployment and provide connectivity at an affordable rate to underserved communities. SCAG staff has drafted a resolution (Resolution No. 21-629-2) for the Regional Council to adopt, which would establish a Broadband Action Plan to assist in bridging the digital divide.

BACKGROUND:

The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) has implemented several initiatives as stated in the September 3, 2020 staff report regarding Emerging Issues and Trends for Future

OUR MISSION

To foster innovative regional solutions that improve the lives of Southern Californians through inclusive collaboration, visionary planning, regional advocacy, information sharing, and promoting best practices.

OUR VISION

Southern California's Catalyst for a Brighter Future

OUR CORE VALUES

Be Open | Lead by Example | Make an Impact | Be Courageous

Planning¹ to address matters regarding the digital divide and matters of equity within underserved communities (including communities of color and rural communities).

The Regional Council adopted Resolution No. 20-623-2, which established a special committee on equity and social justice and directed SCAG to develop a program to address economic and social disparities within communities of color.

Broadband has become essential infrastructure for the 21st century. Schools, offices, retail and governments all rely on online platforms, offering people significant time savings and a digital avenue for economic prosperity. Additionally, digital skills are increasingly necessary for a growing number of jobs.

However, broadband can only deliver benefits to those who have access to connect, afford and know how to use it. By these measures, broadband is still far from a universal service in American cities. Over 2,000,000 Californians do not have access to high-speed broadband service at benchmark speeds of 100 megabits per second downloads and as of December 2018, 23 percent of California housing units, housing 8.4 million residents do not have broadband subscriptions.

According to the 2019 United States Census Data, within the SCAG region alone, approximately 650,000 households (or 10 percent of all households) do not have access to adequate internet speeds (dial-up internet) or no internet access.² These households are disproportionately located in low income and rural areas and the populations are predominantly Black, Latino³ or Senior Citizens (Age 65+).

Access to universal subscription is attributed to a range of factors. Broadband is still considered relatively expensive, and survey results regularly show prices as a significant barrier to broadband adoption.⁴ Many also lack digital skills – significantly 52% of adults are “relatively hesitant” when it comes to new technologies and digital skills, meaning they have low levels of digital skills or limited trust in the internet.⁵ Finally, there are still physical infrastructural gaps that provide another significant barrier for adoption.⁶

¹ SCAG Staff Report on Connect SoCal – Emerging Issues and Trends for Future Planning, pg. 801.

² 2019 U.S. Census ACS Survey Data, Household Income in the Last 12 Months by Presence and Type of Internet Subscription by Household (SCAG Region).

³ Language and terms connected to equity and representation are evolving (Latino v. Latinx) and may not represent current or future best practices. The names of indicators used in this report are drawn from terminology used in the data source (U.S. Census) where they are taken from.

⁴ Monica Anderson, “Mobile Technology and Home Broadband 2019” (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2019).

⁵ John B. Horrigan, “Digital Readiness Gaps” (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2016).

⁶ 2020 Broadband Deployment Report available at: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-20-50A1.pdf>

With the COVID-19 pandemic pushing more activities online, the pandemic has made the digital divide in underserved communities more apparent. At least 124,000 schools within the United States have closed, affecting approximately 55 million students.⁷ With 10 percent of households in the SCAG region lacking proper access to broadband, many students within low income or underserved communities now face a disadvantage in learning and keeping pace with their peers. Further, telework has created a similar division, allowing for some to safely work from home while others must keep commuting to work and putting their health at risk. These issues extend to telemedicine, e-commerce, food delivery services, and entertainment. Activities shifting towards the digital landscape may remain so after the pandemic, and households without access to broadband will face significant educational, health and economic disadvantages.

Executive Order N-73-20 and State Broadband Action Plan

On August 14, 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Executive Order N-73-20 (Attachment 2), which requires state agencies working on the digital divide to accelerate mapping and data collection, funding, deployment and adoption of high-speed internet. It also required the state's Broadband Council, which was established in 2010 to boost broadband deployment, form a new state Broadband Action Plan (Attachment 3). The Plan includes a roadmap for broadband deployment and adoption by local governments, publicly accessible information on funding opportunities for broadband and maximized access in underserved communities and tribal lands.

Sample Resolution and Policy Paper to Bring Broadband in Underserved Communities

Following the signing of Executive Order N-73-20 and at the behest of SCAG's Emerging Technology Committee, local jurisdictions and other stakeholders, SCAG and its sister metropolitan planning organization (MPO), the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), convened a working group to assist in bridging the digital divide. Members of the working group included various stakeholders throughout the region (elected officials, National CORE, BizFed, K-12 school districts, universities, broadband providers, public health officials and others). As a result, SCAG drafted a sample resolution and policy paper to bring broadband in underserved communities for local jurisdictions to adopt, with input from stakeholders (Attachment 4). The sample resolution and policy paper were presented to the Emerging Technologies Committee on October 29, 2020 for input and review.

⁷ "Coronavirus and School Closures", *Education Week*, March 6, 2020. Available online at <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>.

The sample resolution and policy paper recognize broadband access throughout Southern California and exacerbation of the digital divide within underserved communities due to COVID-19. SCAG recognizes that some local jurisdictions (Los Angeles County) have adopted a resolution of their own. As such, the draft resolution was designed to complement existing programs rather than supersede them. Key items the resolution supports are as follows:

- Collaboration with Los Angeles, Orange, Imperial, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego and Ventura Counties, broadband providers, school districts (K-12), community college districts, universities, community and business stakeholders, Regional Broadband Consortiums, California Emerging Technology Fund, the State of California and other federal and regional organizations that have similar goals to increase broadband access throughout Southern California;
- The request for grant funding from the State and/or Federal government for a regional program that provides funding for free internet access for qualifying residents that bridges the economic digital divide;
- Working with collaborating jurisdictions to affect the deployment decisions of broadband providers by lowering permitting fees to a reasonable level, reduce the cost of entry and operation of broadband systems in our communities, reduce the risks of delays during the planning, permitting and construction phases, provide opportunities for increasing revenue, and creating new avenues for competitive entry;
- Identifying broadband opportunity zones, supports the adoption of an emergency ordinance which would allow local jurisdictions to develop specific rules to expedite low cost broadband deployment such as: waivers for microprojects, deployment of broadband infrastructure in underserved communities and fixed wireless or other broadband technologies in rural communities;
- The adoption of consistent fees and expedited broadband permitting processes within collaborating jurisdictions.

To date, three of the six counties (Riverside, San Bernardino, Los Angeles) within the SCAG region have adopted a resolution to address the digital divide, with Riverside and San Bernardino Counties using the working group's sample resolution as a template. SCAG recommends that local jurisdictions use the sample resolution and policy paper as a template for jurisdictions that are interested but have yet to adopt a resolution.

Resolution of SCAG Setting Forth Support to Increase Broadband Access to Bridge the Digital Divide throughout Southern California

As the State and local jurisdictions work towards rapid broadband development, stakeholders have requested that the SCAG Regional Council recognize and work towards bridging the digital divide through regional cohesiveness. As such, SCAG has developed its own resolution for the Regional Council to adopt. SCAG's Resolution recognizes its limited authority and upon approval would direct staff to develop its own Broadband Action Plan which may include but is not limited to the following:

- Develop a model resolution and policy paper addressing the digital divide, for local jurisdictions to adopt;
- Pursue grant funding opportunities and seek partnerships to assist local jurisdictions with broadband implementation, including a regional broadband needs assessment, to complement State efforts;
- Convene a working group which would act as a venue for SCAG, local jurisdictions, broadband providers and stakeholders to develop solutions to allow for rapid deployment of broadband technology such as: streamlining the permit process, lowering fees to a reasonable level, and reducing the cost of entry and operation of broadband systems within underserved communities;
- Include broadband planning, data and research findings, and strategies, as appropriate, as part of SCAG's efforts to ensure an inclusive Regional Economic Recovery and Strategy;
- Incorporate broadband planning, data and research findings, and strategies, as appropriate, into existing SCAG programs (Environmental Justice, Transportation Demand Management, Goods Movement, Sustainability, Resilience, etc.);
- Based on SCAG's findings, utilize data as part of Scenario Planning Process for upcoming and future Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategies.

NEXT STEPS

Upon approval, Staff will provide regular updates to the Regional Council and Policy Committees on the progress of the SCAG's Broadband Action Plan.

FISCAL IMPACT:

This project is funded in SCAG's Fiscal Year 2020-21 Overall Work Program (OWP) under project



020-0161A.04 (Environmental Compliance, Coordination and Outreach)

ATTACHMENT(S):

1. Resolution No. 21-629-2
2. Executive Order N-73-20
3. State Broadband Action Plan
4. Sample Resolution and Policy Paper for Local Jurisdiction