



Monterey County

Item No.

Board Report

Board of Supervisors
Chambers

168 W. Alisal St., 1st Floor
Salinas, CA 93901

Legistar File Number: 20-943

November 17, 2020

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Approve changes to the Board's Legislative Program to authorize Monterey County's support of state and federal legislative advocacy efforts aimed at addressing the digital divide in response to Board Referral No. 2020.25 by Supervisor Alejo and Supervisor Lopez.

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the Board of Supervisors approve changes to the Board's Legislative Program to authorize Monterey County's support of state and federal legislative advocacy efforts aimed at addressing the digital divide in response to Board Referral No. 2020.25 by Supervisor Alejo and Supervisor Lopez.

SUMMARY

On September 15, 2020, Supervisor Alejo and Supervisor Lopez submitted Board Referral No. 2020.25 *"To support collaborative efforts to address the digital divide in partnership with local school districts, cities, the County of Monterey, and community partners to address the digital divide for our local students and all other county residents, and to advocate for solutions at the state and federal level."*

This report addresses the last portion of the referral *"advocate for solutions at the state and federal level"* by approving changes to the Board's Legislative Program and authorizing advocacy efforts at the state and federal level aimed at addressing the digital divide in Monterey County and throughout the state and nation.

DISCUSSION

The pandemic has underscored the critical utility of broadband infrastructure. From the homework gap and workforce adaptations, to essential healthcare services and e-commerce - broadband is now the keystone to our nation's response to the global pandemic and imperative to building resilient and future-ready communities. The lack of reliable broadband is a major economic barrier and a leading driver of socioeconomic inequality.

A lack of internet access disproportionately affects some County residents because internet access is not available in their area or is unaffordable. Expansion of broadband services would benefit economic activities, access to healthcare (e.g.: telehealth); and education (e.g.: distance learning).

In August 2020, a photo of two girls sitting on the sidewalk with their laptops outside a Taco Bell restaurant in the City of Salinas to use the restaurant's Wi-Fi went viral, shining the national spotlight on the digital divide which exists in Monterey County and many other communities in the state and

nation.

Schools are facing significant challenges which disparately impact students of color. According to the Monterey County Office of Education nearly 7,000 students/families do not have access to the tools they need for distance learning (e.g., laptops or tablets), and over 10,000 students do not have internet access in their home because it is not available in their community or is unaffordable to their families.

In recent weeks the State Senate and Assembly have held informational committee hearings related to addressing the digital divide and challenges for distance learning, work and telemedicine. At one hearing the State's non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), relayed that in the Spring of 2020 the California Department of Education reported the need for over 400,000 hotspots for students. And further reported that the Federal Communications Commission standard for internet speed is 25 megabits per second (mbps) download and 3 mbps upload, however a majority of underserved households are in rural areas where internet speeds are significantly slower, 6 mbps upload and 1 mbps download.

Issues identified in the hearings included: gaps in broadband coverage throughout the state; insufficiency of existing broadband speeds in many parts of the state; inequities in connectivity, device/table availability, and provider plans; and the need to increase digital literacy programs.

Initial discussion on possible comprehensive solutions included: introduction of a major broadband bond measure in the 2021 California Legislative Session; more consistent permitting; and granting local governments the ability to pass bonds and special taxes with a 55% vote.

Legislative Committee: On October 22, 2020, the Board's Legislative Committee received a report on legislative advocacy strategies to address the disparate impact of the pandemic on communities of color in Monterey County. A portion of those recommendations related directly to broadband access. It is recommended that the Board approve the addition of these advocacy efforts for incorporation into the Board's current Legislative Program.

- Support/co-sponsor efforts to secure funding for the expansion of broadband and cellular services to underserved areas of Monterey County (e.g., state universal broadband bond) and increase internet speeds.
- Support efforts to reform existing state programs to expand internet access, generate needed revenue, and make it easier for local governments to obtain funding to move local projects forward.
- Support efforts to regulate broadband/internet access as a utility by the Federal Communications Commission and California Public Utilities Commission.
- Support efforts that ensure quality distance learning through expanded broadband access and technology supports, and digital literacy programs especially in rural and underserved communities.

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OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

The County Administrative Office - Intergovernmental and Legislative Affairs Division prepared this report with input from the Information Technology Department and Library.

FINANCING

Approval of the recommendations included in this report will not result in additional General Fund contributions.

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Mark a check to the related Board of Supervisors Strategic Initiatives

- X Economic Development
- X Administration
- X Health & Human Services
- X Infrastructure
- X Public Safety

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Nick Chiulos 11/9/2020 | 4:15 PM PST
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November 9, 2020