

To prosper, state must close the digital divide

Important bill floundering in Legislature

Closing digital divide essential for fairness, prosperity

It is in public interest to ensure all Californians have high-speed Internet access



Carolyn Baldwin uses an iPad at Sheridan Elementary School in February 2015, when students at the rural school got reliable high-speed Internet for the first time. Randall Benton/Sacramento Bee file

By Barbara O'Connor/Special to The Bee

Unfortunately, the Legislature failed to act last week and it could set back for years the progress that California has made in closing the digital divide.

The chairman of the Assembly Utilities and Commerce Committee deferred to industry interests and went against a large and diverse coalition of elected officials and community organizations working to close the divide in both rural and urban areas. That

caused Assemblyman Mark Stone, a Scotts Valley Democrat and author of [Assembly Bill 1758](#), to pull the bill.



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Supporters of the Internet for All Now Act include Valley Vision, Communication Workers of America, the California State Association of Counties, the League of California Cities, Rural County Representatives of California, California Black Chamber of Commerce, La Clinica de la Raza, the Youth Policy Institute and United Ways of California.

The act would authorize collection of an existing modest surcharge on phone bills into a fund to support construction of broadband infrastructure into unserved rural communities and to help low-income households get online.

The fund was established by the Legislature in 2008 and has been an effective tool for leveraging private and federal investments into communities without adequate high-speed Internet access. The legislation would cap the annual amount received from

consumers to less than what was collected in each of the last two years.

Rarely is there an opportunity to invest in the future and provide relief to consumers. Further, legislators must understand that the existing surcharge is the only available source of money to help close the digital divide without enacting a new fee or tax or authorizing a new budget appropriation. This mechanism must be made to work or there will be years more of delay in achieving equitable Internet access.

Closing the digital divide in California is essential for fairness, equity and economic prosperity. Today, 21 percent of all households remain offline at home. Rural and poor children can't use the Internet for homework assignments and fall behind in school. Low-income adults can't search for better jobs, and public safety in times of emergencies is compromised.

In a digital economy, disadvantaged residents are being left behind at an accelerating pace, which is contributing to the growing inequality in our society. Even more sobering, given the amount of government information and public services that are available only online, these residents are systematically being disenfranchised from democracy itself.

It is in the public interest to ensure that all Californians have home high-speed Internet access as soon as possible.

While the committee chairman, Mike Gatto, a Los Angeles Democrat, may have had questions about the bill, he and his staff could have received answers and found solutions long before last week. It is the responsibility of this committee to take steps to ensure digital inclusion and not allow special interests to repeatedly delay getting high-speed Internet access to everyone.

The Legislature has been a national leader in taking bold and innovative steps to close the digital divide – creating the fund, establishing the California Broadband Council and helping public housing residents get online.

Now is the time for legislative leaders to regain that leadership by having the committee waive deadlines and take up the bill, or incorporate it into other legislation. Digital access is a 21st-century civil right, and access delayed is access denied.

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