

California Broadband Council Meets on Solutions for Narrowing Digital Divide

BY: Kayla Nick-Kearney, Techwire | April 10, 2017

California Broadband Council members met in downtown Sacramento last week to discuss the state's Internet needs and potential solutions. The meeting was led by California CIO Amy Tong, the council's chair.

A portion of the meeting focused on 5G and the Internet of Things with presentations from Verizon and AT&T on network capabilities.

As more things become connected, more Californians need to be connected, California Emerging Technology Fund CEO Sunne Wright McPeak said in a call with *Techwire*.

With this in mind, [AB980](#) from Assemblymember Jim Wood was introduced to allow Caltrans to lay broadband conduit in high-priority areas under a "dig-once" plan. [Techwire recently wrote about the legislation.](#)

During the council meeting, McPeak discussed other legislation, such as the Internet for All Now Act, which was introduced by Assemblymembers Eduardo Garcia, Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, Kevin McCarty and a dozen other legislators. The bill, AB 1665, would expand the reach of the California Advanced Services Fund (CASF), a grant program funded through surcharges that was created a decade ago to help bring broadband to unserved and underserved communities.

"They are stating very clearly that it is the goal of the state of California to close the digital divide," McPeak said.

CASF, as currently constructed, uses an existing phone surcharge with the overarching goal of bringing broadband infrastructure to 98 percent of households, especially in rural communities. The goal is that 90 percent of all households using high-speed Internet from home have access on a device that is not a smartphone. But a lingering issue is that 14 percent of Californians who do have high-speed Internet only have a smartphone, which makes them underconnected, McPeak said.

"It's still difficult for a student to do their homework on a smartphone. It's difficult to get workforce skills if you're an adult, using a smartphone only," McPeak said.

Without connectivity, people cannot access government services and town economies cannot compete. Low-performing schools, which are often located in low-income neighborhoods, don't have access to devices, which can lead to stunted digital literacy, she said.

"That all adds up to 12 million people in California who are not participating in the digital economy," McPeak said.

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