

Addressing the Digital Divide in California

BY: Jake Abbott, Appeal-Democrat, Marysville, Calif. | July 3, 2017

(TNS) -- Just ask anyone in the foothills if they have trouble getting a phone signal or finding an internet provider. There's a good chance you'll have to do it in person ... they won't be able to take your call or get your email or text.

"It's awful, just terrible," said Randy Fletcher, Yuba County supervisor for the foothills district. "As soon as you hit the foothills, you lose service. Anything we can do is for the better."

It's a problem for foothills residents, as well as other rural communities throughout the state, due to the landscape and the distance between households. Smaller populations mean fewer cell towers and internet providers, Fletcher said, and it's a problem that needs to be addressed. "One of the biggest things has to do with safety. Between the sheriff's office, the fire department, or just for education, without the infrastructure, you are limited in what you can do in the foothills, and that's a big piece of the puzzle," Fletcher said.

A bill co-authored by local Assemblyman James Gallagher is looking to correct that. If approved by California lawmakers, the bill — AB 1665, also referred to as the "Internet For All Now Act of 2017" — would allocate \$330 million to build new broadband infrastructure, not just in Yuba County, but in other digital-disadvantaged areas throughout the state.

Gallagher's office cited a recent UC Berkeley poll that found 87 percent of Californians have access to a high-speed internet connection at home. Of those respondents, 18 percent only had internet access through a smartphone, and the rest had broadband access through a computing device.

Another study done in April 2016 by the California Public Utilities Commission focused more on rural areas, where 43 percent of households reported internet access was unavailable, or unreliable, where they lived — a total of 424,000 households.

If it becomes law, the act would extend the soon-to-expire California Advanced Service Fund to support broadband infrastructure deployment in under-connected rural areas and disadvantaged communities.

"We look at this as a basic infrastructure issue of the 21st century," Gallagher said.

The bill's end goal is to reach 98 percent household connectivity to high-speed internet per region.

"In town, a lot of people have access to providers like Comcast, but as you get out on the periphery, there are areas that just don't have access, or at the very most they have DSL, which is not very fast and is spotty," Gallagher said.

The bill passed the state Assembly on June 1. The Senate Committee on Energy, Utilities and Communications is expected to discuss the bill on today.

Gallagher said he is hopeful the bill — which has received bipartisan support — will be passed before the California Legislature takes about a month-long recess at the end of July.

"I hope we can see something get done before the break. There is the possibility that we could have some obstacles over in the Senate, but I hope we don't," Gallagher said. "We had a pretty good coalition in the Assembly. We are going to push hard and hopefully get it signed by the governor."

©2017 the Appeal-Democrat (Marysville, Calif.) Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

This article was printed from: <http://www.govtech.com/network/Addressing-the-Digital-Divide-in-California.html>