

■ OPINION

Opinion: San Diego Shows How Highway Projects Can Be Leveraged to Close the Digital Divide



by Hasan Ikhata and Sunne Wright McPeak
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A Caltrans crew repairing a highway. Courtesy Caltrans

Broadband and highways are common-sense companions.

Recently, Caltrans, the [San Diego Association of Governments](#), San Diego County, and the California Transportation Commission joined forces to help

close the digital divide, allocating \$7 million for installation of Internet fiber in conjunction with a scheduled pavement rehabilitation project along State Route 67.

This action was accomplished in a mere six weeks, demonstrating how collaboration and shared purpose can make a difference in the lives of the millions of Californians who are still unconnected to the Internet.

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This critical need has been illuminated and intensified by the pandemic and the associated lack of access to education, jobs and health care. A recent survey sponsored by the California Emerging Technology Fund and conducted independently by the University of Southern California found that nearly 10% of the state's households—more than 3 million people—do not have high-speed Internet connectivity at home.

This is sobering and unacceptable.

We applaud Gov. Gavin Newsom and the Legislature for taking strong action to include in the 2021-2022 state budget an investment of \$6 billion to expand high-speed broadband infrastructure and affordable access throughout

California. This is the right level of state investment to address the needs and attract matching federal funds. It also will accelerate the post-pandemic economic recovery because an investment in all infrastructure, particularly broadband, returns high dividends to economic competitiveness.

Now, the question is how to ensure the public's funds will be used as effectively and efficiently as possible. California must implement an aggressive strategy that will maximize immediate impact and optimize return on investment by embracing the following key principles for action:

- Prioritize and drive infrastructure construction to the hardest-to-reach residents—rural unserved areas, tribal Lands, and poor urban neighborhoods—and then connect all locations, especially anchor institutions (schools, libraries and health care facilities), along the path of deployment.
- Require open-access fiber middle-mile infrastructure with end-user Internet speeds sufficient to support distance learning and telehealth.
- Strive to achieve ubiquitous deployment in each region to avoid cherry-picking for more lucrative areas.
- Encourage coordination among local governments and regional agencies to streamline permitting and achieve economies of scale.
- Develop an open competitive process for Internet service providers to “step up or step aside” to achieve the most cost-effective investment of new dollars by optimizing use of existing infrastructure that ratepayers and taxpayers already have built.

To construct broadband on an ambitious timetable, it must be integrated with transportation projects—a “dig once, dig smart” strategy. The San Diego collaboration is the result of purposeful focus over the past few years by transportation and broadband leaders.

Caltrans and the California Transportation Commission first recognized broadband as a “green strategy” to improve mobility and reduce impacts on the environment. Caltrans then worked with regional broadband consortia to identify strategic corridors where conduit for Internet fiber could be installed.

SANDAG and the Southern California Association of Governments mobilized their 216 member local governments to coordinate action. Finally, SANDAG and SCAG invited Internet service providers to step up as private-sector partners in a model for the state and nation.

This kind of public-sector collaboration is powerful and transforms how things get done—as taxpayers and ratepayers expect us to do and deserve for their hard-earned money. It also is the key to attracting private-sector investments and leveraging those dollars in the public interest.

There is no substitute for leadership and sincere partnerships—and the combination will ensure we get our money’s worth from broadband investments and achieve digital equity for all Californians.

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