

# Attachment A

## **Broadband Strategic Plan**

### **Overview**

The Santa Barbara County Broadband Strategic Plan responds to the regional need for high-speed internet access, which was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools, businesses, public services, and health care support moved online and people started working from home. Gaps in access to reliable, affordable high-speed internet disenfranchise households by limiting their access to education, the workforce, health care, and democratic processes. The digital divide defines the gap between those with the capacity to use technology and those left out of opportunities provided by digital access. While Santa Barbara County has access to moderate levels of connectivity, all households, businesses, and public institutions would benefit from the faster and more reliable internet access broadband connections deliver. Thus, the County in partnership with the Santa Barbara Association of Governments (SBCAG) and the Broadband Consortium of the Pacific Coast (BCPC), and the eight jurisdictions within the county developed a countywide broadband strategic plan to address the gaps in service, provide faster and more reliable service to our residents with the goal of closing the digital divide throughout our County.

### **Challenge**

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the growing digital divide, and access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet became an indisputable necessity for households across Santa Barbara County. Increased demand for infrastructure impacted reliability, and many users lacked access to adequate internet service and devices. The need for additional capacity in northern Santa Barbara County had been identified prior to the pandemic by several cities, the county, and local economic development organizations. The Tellus Ventures' 2020 California Broadband Infrastructure Report Card assigned the County of Santa Barbara a "D" rating due to the lack of private sector competition. The need to close the digital divide in the County became a priority post-pandemic. The County along with regional partners spearheaded the effort to develop a countywide strategic plan to address these critical issues.

### **Solution**

The Board of Supervisors recognized the need to address lack of broadband connectivity and allocated \$200,000 of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to fund the development of a broadband strategic plan. The eight jurisdictions within the county also contributed to the development of the plan, highlighting the collaborative spirit to address countywide issues within our county. A Memorandum of Understanding was put in place to formalize the partnership. The plan begun with a broadband service availability analysis, a needs assessment, speed tests and surveys, and multiple community stakeholder forums. The needs analysis examined California Public Utilities (CPUC) data to identify priority unserved areas in our county. The identification of these unserved areas represents opportunities to partner in ultimately developing the last-mile network. Speed tests were distributed throughout the county to assess residents' both upload and download speeds. In mid-2022, approximately 3000 results were collected, however the speed test remained open through early 2023 to provide more balanced county results. The results showed us the slow speeds throughout the county.

The needs assessment 5-10 minute survey gave further insight on current broadband needs from residents throughout our county such as the percentage of people who have internet at

home and the number of residents who perceived internet costs were too expensive. All of the analysis and surveys done were used as a means to construct the plan and provide thoughtful solutions and recommends ~~as to~~ ways we can bring access and affordable internet to the home.

Several community forums were held over the course of 2022 to engage community conversations with a “boots on the ground” approach. Responses informed themes identified as broadband access gaps and community challenges in achieving Broadband for All and revealed the quality-of-life impacts.

The solution of creating a broadband strategic plan to address these issues laid the groundwork for sound recommendations to achieve digital equity across the county and work towards closing the digital divide so that residents can have access to fast and affordable internet. The findings and recommendations lay a clear path, or strategy on ways the County and partners can expand capacity, improve connectivity, and provide access to residents and businesses alike.

### **Innovation**

While broadband connectivity has been recognized as a need in Santa Barbara County, the pandemic really shed light on the lack of high-speed internet access and acted as a catalyst to prioritize broadband planning and ultimately infrastructure. The innovative and collaborative spirit of a partnership between the local COG, the County team, all eight cities in the county, and local economic development organizations showcased how various agencies can come together to create a regional plan to address issues that impact us all. The Plan includes community profiles for each of the eight cities as well as one for the unincorporated county. Each of the community profiles include individual key opportunities and priorities in addition to larger regional recommendations for the county as a whole. These focused and targeted recommended actions speak to the uniqueness, challenges and barriers to each community area and outlines ways cities can achieve steps toward better connectivity on their own. The plan has regional recommendations as well that ties all of the individual opportunities and priorities together. This innovative approach recognizes differences through various parts of the county and ensures their specific recommended actions are aligned with their individual challenges.

### **Results**

After completion of the plan, the County and partners worked on plan implementation. Identifying and pursuing grant opportunities was identified both as a county and regional “next step.” The County, in partnership with the local COG (SBCAG), successfully secured a \$1M Local Agency Technical Assistance Grant with CPUC for a broadband preparation connectivity project. This grant encompassed recommended actions derived from the strategic plan including the formation of a Joint Powers Authority focused on Broadband, high-level network design of the four priority focus areas from the plan, and a countywide programmatic Environmental Impact Report (EIR). This is merely one of the successes that the plan laid a framework for and sets the framework for alignment with the State’s Broadband for All initiative.

### **Replicability**

Broadband Strategic Planning across multiple organizations and agencies can be easily replicated by other counties through a collaborative framework. Partnership was critical in the

development of the plan and required all jurisdictions to prioritize the need for access in their communities. Through use of the local COG, we were able to leverage partnerships and foster relationships that resulted in a plan that will set a framework for our connectivity strategy as additional State and Federal Broadband funding becomes available.

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### **Additional Material Links**

Strategic Planning Document: [Broadband Strategic Plan](#)

Link to website: <http://www.sbcag.org/broadband.html>