



COUNTY OF SONOMA

575 ADMINISTRATION
DRIVE, ROOM 102A
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 3/11/2025

To: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): Economic Development Collaborative

Staff Name and Phone Number: Ethan Brown, Katherine DiPasqua, and Kate Fosburgh (707) 565-7170

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisorial District(s): Countywide

Title:

Broadband: Grant Update and Internet Subsidy Program Site Recommendations

Recommended Action:

- A. Receive update on broadband infrastructure and digital equity grants.
- B. Adopt a Resolution delegating authority to the Director of the Economic Development Collaborative, to apply for and negotiate and execute grant agreements and related grant documents necessary for obtaining funding from public agencies or public non-profits for digital access efforts and related initiatives, including but not limited to, adoption, accessibility, training, affordability, and digital equity, in a form approved by County Counsel.
- C. Approve list of affordable housing sites to be included in the County's Internet Subsidy Program, funded by American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds previously allocated by the Board.

Executive Summary:

In December 2024, Economic Development Collaborative (EDC) staff presented an update to your Board on EDC's Broadband initiatives and pending grant applications. This item provides updates on some of those funding efforts and makes a recommendation to expand authority for the Director of the Economic Development Collaborative to apply for, negotiate, and execute grant agreements for funding to support digital access activities, including adoption, accessibility, training, affordability, and digital equity.

The December 2024 item also requested to reprogram previously allocated American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding that was set aside for Broadband to support a time-limited Internet Subsidy Program. The program will provide free internet service for one year to residents of selected affordable housing sites throughout the County, provided by Comcast.

The December item included a list of potential affordable housing sites that were eligible for the program (Attachment 1). Those sites were selected because they were in high need areas, as identified in the EDC's Digital Needs Assessment (Attachment 2), had a minimum of 20 units, and were operated or served by Burbank Housing, MidPen Housing, PEP Housing, and West County Community Services (WCCS). From that original list, staff have worked with the housing providers to identify the recommended properties proposed today. Sites were selected based on geographic distribution between County districts, even distribution

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between residents in need, including seniors, families, low-income workers, and homeless, properties located in a Comcast service area, properties with no conflicting grants or contractual obligations, and recommendations from the Board of Supervisors during prior meetings.

Discussion:

Last Mile Federal Funding Account (FFA) Grant Award

In August 2023, your Board provided direction to the Economic Development Collaborative (EDC) on priority areas for broadband infrastructure deployment. That Fall, the County, through its partnership with Golden State Connect Authority (GSCA), submitted an application for last mile infrastructure funding through the California Public Utilities Commission's (CPUC) Last Mile Federal Funding Account (FFA) Grant Program. The application included the Jenner, Walsh Landing, Southeast Santa Rosa, and East Cloverdale project areas.

The County/GSCA application was not approved. However, in January 2025, the CPUC approved an award of \$17,010,997 to WiConduit and GigabitNow for two broadband expansion projects in western Sonoma County. The link to the CPUC decision and action can be found here:

<https://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Published/G000/M556/K119/556119763.PDF>.

WiConduit is a non-profit organization and GigabitNow is a telecommunication company with existing projects in the Sea Ranch area. The CPUC-approved plan is for WiConduit and GigabitNow to allocate awarded funding to two projects. One project, referred to as Forestville Connect, will include 35 miles of last-mile fiber, reach 295 unserved locations, and is projected to cost \$7,776,979. The other project, named Sonoma Coast Connect, will include 40 miles of last-mile fiber, reach 507 unserved locations, and is projected to cost \$9,234,018. Both projects propose open access networks, connection to the State Middle Mile, and speeds of up to 1,000/1,000 megabits per second. According to their application, WiConduit will administer the grant and own the infrastructure, and GigabitNow will handle network construction, operation, and maintenance.

EDC staff have met with WiConduit to offer support for these projects, including an offer to share the County's low-level design package for the Walsh Landing and Jenner project areas and an invitation to coordinate in the future to avoid potential duplication of efforts. Additionally, EDC is assessing options for further delivery of broadband infrastructure to priority areas, particularly with regards to planning for the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program.

Future Federal Broadband Funding Uncertainties

EDC has been tracking three federal broadband funding sources very closely to determine how the new federal administration will impact potential funding opportunities. The first is the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program, which provides \$42.45 billion in funding to expand high-speed internet access and close the digital divide. California has been allocated approximately \$1.86 billion under the BEAD program. While staff have no reason to believe that the funding will go away entirely, or that California's allocation of funds will change, staff does believe there will be a delay in opening the application window and that some of the program criteria will change. For instance, the current program prioritizes fiber-optic technology, which some argue is not the most cost-effective solution for all areas. There is a possibility that technology preferences will change, potentially favoring alternate technologies including wireless or satellite. The current guidelines also require that internet

service providers offer low-cost plans for low-income individuals and families, which has already been criticized by the new administration.

The second is the NTIA's Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program, which is a nationwide internet adoption and access initiative with a budget of \$1.25 billion. Sonoma County partnered with California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) and Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC) on each of their applications for \$12 million. Prior to the change in administration, the California Department of Technology (CDT), the State agency administering the program, announced an award to CETF for its competitive grant application. Since then, the funding recommendations have not been voted on and it is unclear where the funds are currently being held or the status of RCRC's application.

The final funding source is the NTIA's Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program, which provides \$1.44 billion to develop and implement digital equity plans and initiatives. California has been awarded \$70.2 million from the Capacity Grant Program and based on the metrics included in the draft grant guidelines, it is expected that Sonoma County's allocation will be approximately \$500,000. That amount is subject to change, pending the publication of the final grant guidelines. The CDT has said that they cannot speculate on potential impacts to the program but plan to proceed as planned until asked to stop. The application window is planned to open in early 2025. As such, EDC is continuing to develop its grant application, which will include partnerships with local jurisdictions and regional partners. □

Considering the rapid changes occurring at the federal level, and desire to act quickly to secure digital equity funding sources, staff is requesting that your Board delegate authority to the Director of the Economic Development Collaborative to apply for and to negotiate and execute all grant agreements to support digital access and related initiatives, including adoption, accessibility, training, affordability, and digital equity, in a form approved by County Counsel. Similar authority was delegated by your Board on August 1, 2023, to the department head for all grants related to broadband infrastructure, design, and program planning.

Internet Subsidy Program

In September 2024, the EDC conducted a Digital Needs Assessment to determine what barriers communities are facing to fully access and participate in the digital world. The survey clearly showed that Sonoma County residents who live in low-income communities are experiencing a digital divide, either due to affordability, access to devices, or lack of training. To help address this need, your Board approved the creation of a time-limited Internet Subsidy Program, funded by ARPA, and authorized the EDC Director to enter into an agreement with Comcast for the purchase of over five hundred internet subscriptions (<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=7036319&GUID=753E31BA-D7C0-4FCC-8BD3-96191485FE8B&Options=&Search=>>).

The internet subscriptions purchased by the County will be good for one year of free service at a minimum speed of 100 MBPS download and 20 MBPS upload. To meet ARPA expenditure guidelines and ensure program consistency, only residents of the selected affordable housing sites will be eligible to participate in this program. The subscriptions include all costs of equipment rentals, surcharges, and fees for the standard one-year of service, meaning that recipients will not pay anything for the internet services.

In the past month, EDC has been working with Burbank Housing, MidPen Housing, West County Community

Services, and PEP Housing to identify the best properties for this program. The properties listed below were selected because they are geographically spread amongst each of the five County districts, house a broad spectrum of residents in need, including seniors, families, low-income workers, and homeless, will be operational during the term of the program, have a minimum of 20 units per property, are in a Comcast service area, and there are no conflicting grants or contractual obligations at the property.

After the initial list of potential housing properties was presented to your Board in December 2024, two properties that meet all program criteria are now recommended to be added: 414 Petaluma in District 2, and Elderberry Commons in District 5. The two properties were initially excluded since project development timeframes indicated the projects would not be operational in time for the program. However, those projects now look to be operational in time. Please see Attachment 3 for a map of all the recommended property locations.

Participation in this program will be voluntary, and it is expected that some residents will choose not to opt into this program. In the event extra subscriptions become available for this or other reasons, alternate or backup properties have also been listed.

Name of Property	City	Housing Type	No. of Units	District
Springs Village	Sonoma	Family + Low-Income Worker	80	1
Celestina Garden Apts.	Sonoma	Senior	40	1
Fetters Apartments*	Sonoma	Family	60	1
414 Petaluma	Petaluma	Supportive + Low-Income Worker	44	2
Logan Place	Petaluma	Family	66	2
Vida Nueva*	Rohnert Park	Supportive	24	2
Crossroads Apts.	Santa Rosa	Family	79	3
Carrillo Place Apts.	Santa Rosa	Family	68	3
Larkfield Oaks	Santa Rosa	Family	56	4
Harvest Grove Apts.	Healdsburg	Family + Low-Income Worker	44	4
Park Land Senior Apts.*	Healdsburg	Senior	24	4
Fife Creek Commons	Guerneville	Family	48	5
Elderberry Commons	Sebastopol	Supportive	31	5
George's Hideaway**	Guerneville	Supportive	21	5

** Alternate or backup property should additional subscriptions become available. Subscriptions will be distributed on a first come first served basis.*

*** George's Hideaway is expected to be completed in Summer 2025*

Strategic Plan:

This item directly supports the County's Five-year Strategic Plan and is aligned with the following pillar, goal, and objective.

Pillar: Resilient Infrastructure

Goal: Goal 4: Implement countywide technological solutions to promote resiliency and expand community access.

Objective: Objective 1: Leverage funding and seek grants to expand communications infrastructure within the community to improve equitable access to broadband, wireless, and cell phone services.

Pillar: Resilient Infrastructure

Goal: Goal 4: Implement countywide technological solutions to promote resiliency and expand community access.

Objective: Objective 2: Leverage existing fiber optic infrastructure and grant opportunities to expand wireless and broadband access across County.

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?

No

Prior Board Actions:

12/3/24 - Broadband Update (

[<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=7036319&GUID=753E31BA-D7C0-4FCC-8BD3-96191485FE8B&Options=&Search=>](https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=7036319&GUID=753E31BA-D7C0-4FCC-8BD3-96191485FE8B&Options=&Search=>))

8/1/23 - Broadband Infrastructure Implementation Options (

[<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6300680&GUID=E48B6D69-DA07-4DFF-9B7F-E8F3E99F4FE8&Options=&Search=>](https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6300680&GUID=E48B6D69-DA07-4DFF-9B7F-E8F3E99F4FE8&Options=&Search=>))

12/6/22 - California Public Utilities Commission Grant and Broadband Update (

[<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5948413&GUID=B17C2ED9-F822-4F59-82B0-441CD112C428&Options=&Search=>](https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5948413&GUID=B17C2ED9-F822-4F59-82B0-441CD112C428&Options=&Search=>))

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY24-25 Adopted	FY25-26 Projected	FY26-27 Projected
Budgeted Expenses	\$199,826.40		
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures	\$199,826.40		
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal	\$199,826.40		
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
General Fund Contingencies			

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Total Sources	\$199,826.40		
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Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The total cost of the internet subscriptions is \$199,826.40. Appropriations were included in the Fiscal Year 2024-25 Adopted Budget and anticipated spending was discussed in the EDC’s December 3, 2024 Board item.

Staffing Impacts:			
Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

Click or tap here to enter text.

Attachments:

1. Affordable Housing Sites from Solicitation
2. Digital Needs Assessment Summary Report
3. Map of Recommended Properties
4. Resolution
5. Presentation

Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:

Click or tap here to enter text.