



## Legislation Text

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**File #:** 2021-0351, **Version:** 1

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**To:** Sonoma County Board of Supervisors  
**Department or Agency Name(s):** Economic Development  
**Staff Name and Phone Number:** Sheba Person-Whitley - (707) 565-7170  
**Vote Requirement:** 4/5th  
**Supervisorial District(s):** Countywide

**Title:**

Access Sonoma Broadband Action Plan

**Recommended Action:**

- A) Accept the Economic Development department's Broadband Action Plan, and receive an update on next steps.
- B) Direct department staff to evaluate optimum organizational/governance models for the execution of the Action Plan
- C) Adopt Budget Resolution to adjust the FY 2020-21 Economic Development department budget establishing appropriations for consultant, grants procurements, and legal services; financed from available FY 2020-21 General fund contingencies.

(4/5<sup>th</sup> Vote Required)

**Executive Summary:**

The Access Sonoma Broadband Action Plan seeks to explore the creation of a publicly governed broadband entity that has the capability of deploying, owning, and managing broadband infrastructure and services within the County of Sonoma in an effort to close the regional digital divide. The plan presents a path forward to deploy broadband in Sonoma County, starting with a comprehensive outreach component that will explore what type of publicly governed broadband entity. The recommended path forward supports Sonoma County's Five-Year Strategic Plan's Resilient Infrastructure pillar 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."

Staff recommends the Board of Supervisors accept the Access Sonoma Broadband Action Plan, direct staff to begin the outreach and governance structure components of the plan financed with \$315,000 of General Fund contingencies to immediately secure needed consultant, grant procurement, and legal services. The results of the outreach and governance structure research will inform the development of a publicly governed broadband entity. Department staff will return within six months to the Board to present outreach findings, organizational structure research, and governance structure recommendations.

**Discussion:**

Sonoma County prioritized expanded community access to technology in the Five-Year Strategic Plan, and the Access Sonoma Broadband Action plan aligns with the County's Strategic Plan, Goal 4 - Resilient Infrastructure Pillar:

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

**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.

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

In an effort to bring broadband to underserved or unserved regions and close the regional digital divide, the Board approved dedicating a 0.5 full time Department Analyst, financed with federal grant funding from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and project grant funds from the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). One of the results of this investment is the Access Sonoma Broadband Action Plan (Plan). The Plan provides a framework for outreach, development of a publicly governed broadband entity, infrastructure to support broadband facilities, and adoption of programs for broadband deployment in Sonoma County.

Due to a multitude of deployment barriers found in unserved and underserved areas (e.g. higher infrastructure costs and lower returns), it has not been economically viable for most private companies to deploy broadband to many parts of Sonoma County, focusing instead on denser populations with greater financial returns. Broadband infrastructure exists closer to the 101 corridor; however, no broadband infrastructure exists in many of Sonoma County's rural areas. Additionally, some urban communities experience barriers to access the internet due to non-infrastructure, adoption related issues such as affordability, digital illiteracy, or technology access.

One proven methodology for reducing the initial high cost for private companies who would otherwise be interested in supplying broadband to rural communities is by developing a multi-sided public-private-partnership. The public sector role is to increase ubiquitous access in communities by directly investing in network assets to reduce private companies' barriers of entry in hard to serve communities. The Access Sonoma Broadband Action Plan lays the path for evaluating how to build a partnership of this nature in Sonoma County. In this model, Sonoma County and public partners may own and lease fiber optic network infrastructure to private entities.

This type of public-private partnership results in an open access network. According to the Institute for Local Self-Reliance ([muninetworks.org](http://muninetworks.org)),

*"The open access model is often compared to road systems. Roads are built and maintained through both public funds and taxes on vehicles, but do not themselves fill the coffers of municipalities. They are then used by everyone - trucking companies, UPS, taxi cabs, pizza delivery people, etc. - to deliver services or get around. For the municipality, the net gain of building robust road systems comes in economic development successes, improvements in quality of life, and other indirect benefits rather than direct profits.*

*Building open access broadband networks along the same principles has proven immensely successful at fostering competition and producing economic gains in some U.S. communities, but also more extensively in [Sweden, France, and Japan](#)*  
[http://www.ftthcouncil.eu/documents/PressReleases/2014/PR2014\\_EU\\_Ranking\\_Stockholm\\_FINAL](http://www.ftthcouncil.eu/documents/PressReleases/2014/PR2014_EU_Ranking_Stockholm_FINAL).

*. In the United States, this model has been used less frequently, in part because of differences in national regulation and the power of the largest corporations to shape policy.”*

Using this Open Access model, a publicly governed broadband entity could have the ability to build, own and maintain the infrastructure used to supply broadband in Sonoma County. Service providers would use the public entity’s infrastructure to provide broadband services to the community at a lower rate. The service providers would pay fees to the public entity, which would be used to maintain the infrastructure.

The major components of the Broadband Action Plan (outreach, the development of a publicly governed broadband entity, infrastructure to support broadband facilities, and adoption programs that will result in successful broadband deployment), are summarized below.

### **Outreach: Analyze various options for a publicly governed broadband entity with technical and local input**

The EDB Director will organize a technical advisory committee to develop recommendations for the Director to bring back to the Board. EDB is recommending that the Board of Supervisors direct staff to implement the outreach component of the action plan. The EDB Director will coordinate with representatives from cities and community based organizations to provide technical and local information that will inform the analysis of various potential governance structures that may further Sonoma County’s expansion of broadband. EDB will continue to collaborate with the Office of Equity to ensure that broadband access for underserved communities remains a top priority. Additionally, EDB will engage potential partners and other stakeholders that are interested in collaborating on infrastructure deployment and programmatic services.

EDB will analyze which operating structure for a publicly governed broadband entity will best suit the goals established in Sonoma County’s Five-Year Strategic Plan. EDB will consider multiple organizational models, including (but not limited to) utilizing only existing public agencies, developing a community facilities district, community service district, county service area, and/or joint powers authority. EDB will utilize criteria that ranks each governance structures’ opportunity for success in Sonoma County, which EDB will present to the Board of Supervisors for consideration.

There are many successful case studies across the nation using similar models. UTOPIA Fiber is a publicly governed broadband entity with an open access model located in Utah, which California state agencies have recognized as a successful model for local governments and other agencies to adopt. In addition, some of California’s regional broadband consortia are pursuing similar initiatives to position their region to leverage upcoming state and federal broadband infrastructure funds, including the Connected Capital Area Broadband Consortium (managed by Valley Vision) and the Central Coast Broadband Consortium.

### **Organization: establishing a publicly governed broadband entity**

After conducting outreach and analyzing various models, EDB will return to the Board of Supervisors to present their findings and make recommendations on next steps. Once the Board of Supervisors provides direction on an organizational model, the Access Sonoma Broadband Action Plan provides general parameters to establish the publicly governed broadband entity. This includes organizing with required agencies (e.g. the Local Agency Formation Commission, the California Fair Political Practices Commission, the Secretary of State, etc.) as well as formalizing a business plan to acquire funding and initiate network and programmatic operations.

**Infrastructure: Develop broadband infrastructure projects, leveraging public assets, as well as local, state, and federal funding opportunities.**

The process to develop broadband infrastructure projects requires tasks such as documenting and organizing existing public and private assets, identifying partners, aligning with funding opportunities, coordinating with community initiatives and priorities, designing and engineering an appropriate technology architecture, and much more. The process requires general expertise in a wide range of areas to develop projects that can secure funding successfully.

After coordinating with the Technical Advisory Committee, the EDB Director will bring a list of recommendations to the Board to consider. The preliminary review set forth in the Broadband Action Plan indicates that Infrastructure improvements will be most useful if approached in a phased process. Phase one could consider developing a “backbone” broadband network for Sonoma County, which is a major north to south network. Phase two of infrastructure could include building “ribs” that extend from the “backbone.” Also called the middle-mile network in the Access Sonoma Broadband Action Plan, this infrastructure could connect smaller municipalities, residential communities and other important facilities. Some of the major areas that could be included in this phase include the Agua Caliente Springs and the Russian River area. Phase three of infrastructure could be the last-mile. Located between the middle-mile routes, business sites, and residential areas are “last-mile” segments that connect to the middle-mile infrastructure and terminate curbside or near driveways at premises.

**Adoption: Develop broadband adoption programs, utilizing regional partners, as well as local, state, and federal funding opportunities.**

Many communities in Sonoma County experience non-infrastructure related barriers to access the internet, including digital literacy, technology adoption, and affordability of services. The Broadband Action Plan calls out the need to develop adoption programs based on successful models used by other organizations. These programs typically involve community outreach, public-private-partnerships and grant opportunities. There are successful adoption programs throughout California, and even some locally, that have resulted in positive outcomes to close the digital divide. A publicly governed broadband entity can play a major role in broadband adoption by securing state and federal grant funding to create new programs as well as collaborating with existing programs in Sonoma County to maximize the impact of adoption programs throughout the region.

**Next Steps:**

Newly available and proposed funding from state and federal sources has created added urgency to efforts already underway. In order to quickly and efficiently capitalize on opportunities, staff anticipates the following actions to take place over the next 6-12 months:

1. Immediately evaluate the County’s ability to apply for competitive funding from state and federal sources, and the ability to transfer funds and the associated projects to a publicly governed broadband entity when it is established. EDB will work with the County Administrator’s Office and County Counsel’s Office to determine resources to acquire, manage, track and report grants.
2. Continue to work with County staff, legislative advocates, California State Association of Counties and others to advocate for federal and state funding for two possible projects:
  - a. Conduct a field survey of the WilTel duct that runs along 101 to specify its location,

preliminarily assess its condition, and ensure that the route is marked. Determine and make needed improvements and repairs. Deploy fiber in the Wiltel duct.

- b. Leverage dark fiber (fiber that exists but is not being utilized) along the SMART corridor, could be used for municipalities.
3. Within two months, conduct a Request for Proposals to hire a consultant who can conduct the outreach component of the action plan, who will have the expertise to analyze various options for a separate, publicly governed entity. Staff will evaluate state, federal and private funding sources to determine if grants are available for this work. This may result in returning to the board to approve contracts and request funds.
  4. Within six months, make a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors regarding which type of publicly governed entity could best serve the goals established in the Five-Year Strategic Plan.
  5. Within 12 months, if directed by the Board, a governing structure is created and if so directed, can proceed with the steps needed to undertake portions of the Action Plan.

**Prior Board Actions:**

- June 11<sup>th</sup> 2019: Approval of the North Bay North Coast Broadband Consortium Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Counties of Sonoma, Marin, Mendocino, and Napa Counties.
- June 14<sup>th</sup> 2019: The BOS Approval of the creation of a new Broadband Department Analyst position at the Economic Development department.

**FISCAL SUMMARY**

<b>Expenditures</b>	<b>FY 20-21 Adopted</b>	<b>FY21-22 Projected</b>	<b>FY 22-23 Projected</b>
Budgeted Expenses			
Additional Appropriation Requested	\$315,000		
<b>Total Expenditures</b>			
<b>Funding Sources</b>			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies	\$315,000		
<b>Total Sources</b>	<b>\$315,000</b>		

**Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:**

Staff anticipates consulting/facilitation services, legal services and grant application/management services will be necessary during the Outreach and Analysis phase of the Action Plan. Having appropriations available will allow staff to immediately procure services.

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

**Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):**

None

**Attachments:**

Access Sonoma Broadband Action Plan  
FY 2020-2021 Budget Resolution Adjustment

**Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:**

None