

We have great chance to boost broadband access – but do it right

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With a historic investment in broadband on the horizon, Gov. Newsom and the California Legislature have an unprecedented opportunity to bring chronically unserved California households online with high-speed Internet.

Our member companies at the [California Cable & Telecommunications Association \(CCTA\)](#), which comprise some of the state’s largest Internet Service Providers (ISPs), agree with Gov. Newsom and state legislative leaders that the time is now for comprehensive, bold action to achieve the vision of “Broadband for All.”

While enthusiasm is rightfully high around this historic multi-billion dollar broadband investment, the newly released trailer bill – [Assembly Bill 156](#) – should be modified to ensure that Gov. Newsom’s plan will actually connect more Californians.

The Legislature needs to clearly prioritize who will and won’t benefit in a way that maximizes the impact and value of this massive investment.

First, we must acknowledge that the proposed state-owned open access middle-mile network will be limited in reach. The \$3.25 billion in the budget for this middle-mile infrastructure is slightly less than the originally forecasted \$4 billion investment, which the [Legislative Analyst’s Office](#) projected would take an estimated four years to build and would cover roughly 8,000 highway miles in California – or *only 2%* of California’s highways.

The Legislature needs to clearly prioritize who will and won’t benefit in a way that maximizes the impact and value of this massive investment.

Our utmost priority must be to provide Internet access to the hardest-to-reach residents in chronically unserved areas. An estimated [462,000 California households](#) currently do not have access to high-speed Internet throughout the state, yet AB 156 currently includes a complex layering of multiple unenforceable “priorities” for deployment with no guarantee that these remaining households lacking internet service will not get left behind once again.

To efficiently target the use of these available public funds where they are needed most, California leaders should amend AB 156 to explicitly and directly require that the proposed \$3.25 billion open access middle-mile network be deployed in [“unserved” areas](#) – defined as having no provider offering service at speeds of 25 Mbps downstream and 3 Mbps upstream.

It would be irresponsible for policymakers to prioritize overbuilding infrastructure in areas such as San Francisco and Los Angeles that already have access to multiple high-speed Internet service options, while continuing to leave unserved communities in areas such as Tehama, Mono and Mendocino counties behind.

Second, we must also acknowledge that middle-mile infrastructure alone will not connect anyone to Internet service – we need to couple this investment with guaranteed last-mile connectivity.

Many public investments in middle-mile broadband networks have failed because lawmakers did not pair these investments with guaranteed last-mile connections. To prevent California’s investment from suffering the same fate, AB 156 should require that all broadband projects deployed with public funds [demonstrate “viability.”](#) which means middle-mile projects must demonstrate interest to interconnect from one or more last-mile providers that have a business plan with enough households and businesses likely to subscribe to service.

Third, time is of the essence. Building a new broadband infrastructure will take several years, and we should not make unserved Californians wait for service any longer than absolutely necessary. Recognizing that all investments are needed to close the digital divide, AB 156 should provide streamlining for permits and environmental review for ALL broadband deployment projects – whether made with public or private investments.

Lastly, we know Gov. Newsom and legislative leaders are as committed as we are to bringing broadband to all Californians. To do so, we cannot lose sight of the fact that [1.9 million California households](#) currently have access to broadband but choose not to subscribe for service – more than four times the number who actually lack access to service.

While CCTA members offer free and low-cost Internet service to qualifying households, barriers to adoption remain, including affordability, lack of necessary devices such as computers or tablets and a lack of digital skills. Small state investments encouraging broadband adoption – such as providing free devices or service subsidies – would do more to immediately and cost-effectively close the digital divide than just investing in broadband infrastructure deployment.

The governor’s proposal provides an excellent framework to make broadband for all a reality. By clarifying AB 156 to ensure we only fund viable projects that connect our most disproportionately unserved areas, we can capitalize on this historic, once-in-a-generation opportunity.

Together, we can meet this moment to achieve broadband for all in the Golden State – let’s get it right.

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Editor’s Note: Carolyn McIntyre is president of the California Cable & Telecommunications Association.