



Senate Energy, Utilities & Communications Committee
Oversight Hearing

State Broadband Investments: Progress Towards Connecting the
Unserved

Tuesday, March 7, 2023
9:00 a.m.

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INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chair Bradford, Vice Chair Dahle and honorable committee members. My name is Kome Ajise and I serve as the Executive Director for the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG). Thank you for having me to provide insight on this important topic.

SCAG’S BROADBAND PROGRAM EFFORTS

As a transportation agency, SCAG evaluates the growing relationship between telework and Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT). During the height of the pandemic, stakeholders asked us to expand our broadband efforts to assist in bridging the digital divide. As a result, in February of 2021, SCAG’s 86-member regional council adopted a broadband resolution.

Since its adoption, SCAG has:

- Completed our Telework/VMT Report, which could yield up to 15% reduction in VMT for work commute trips.
- Initiated a Permit Streamlining Project that seeks to develop a streamlined permit approach, model permit, ordinance, and fee structure for local jurisdictions to replicate and implement.
- Initiated a campaign to assist our local jurisdictions in promoting the Affordability Connectivity Program (ACP).
- Developed a Digital Action Plan, which provides an in-depth overview of the digital divide and solutions to close the gap (due for adoption in April).

- Applied for the Local Agency Technical Assistance (LATA) grant to help smaller jurisdictions expand connectivity in their communities.

NEED FOR COORDINATION WITH LOCAL JURISDICTIONS

SCAG's 86-member board represents a broad spectrum of communities across Southern California, including six (6) counties, 191 cities, six (6) county transportation commissions and representation from the Native American tribes and air districts. In our experience, larger cities in our region have been able to allocate resources to bridge the divide in their communities or are at least positioned to take steps toward that goal. Smaller cities, however, just don't have the "bandwidth" as they fight to keep the lights on coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic while simultaneously working to meet their RHNA goals and housing element update deadlines.

SCAG has made tremendous progress in establishing relationships with the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) and the California Department of Technology (CDT). We have participated in many working groups as it relates to middle-mile, last-mile, state equity plans, and grant funding. While the State has been a great partner, there is a void created by smaller cities, especially those with large moderate-to-low-income populations who, as I mentioned, do not have the capacity to participate in these state working groups and workshops.

Since the passage of our Broadband Resolution, I can tell you that we are already actively having this conversations, which is why SCAG's involvement is critical to closing the digital divide. As an example, many local jurisdictions we have been in conversation with are not aware that the CDT and Caltrans are developing a middle-mile network within proximity to their city. Additionally, if you look at the list of applicants for the LATA grants, you will notice that most applications funded are from larger jurisdictions with access to more resources.

SCAG would like to see a more equitable distribution of funding and is working to inform local jurisdictions of what is available. We are also lifting up their concerns and issues as these critical programs are being developed.

CONCERNS OVER REQUIREMENTS / STRUCTURING OVER GRANT PROGRAM

Several statewide grant programs exist, and there is a sizeable influx of funding coming from the Legislature's commitment made in previous state budgets and from President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. SCAG asks that any funding program ensure an equitable distribution of funding with regards to how funds are distributed, including selection criteria, and the program's structuring.

As an example, in our discussions with smaller cities regarding LATA grants, we found several reasons why they were not applying: they did not have staff capacity and or technical knowledge, they cannot afford to take on a deliverable based grant, or they expressed difficulty in accessing information. In situations like this, SCAG has applied for grants on behalf of local jurisdictions and assumed the burden of project management. In our own LATA grant application, SCAG

proposed identifying three (3) opportunity zones and developing preliminary specifications for last-mile projects.

CONCLUSION

I thank you for your time and for having me. I am available for any questions.