The State Threatens to Redline California's Least Connected Communities in Multi-Billion Dollar Broadband Infrastructure Projects

Digital equity advocates came together at a California Broadband Council meeting to voice their concerns about the projects' reliance on bad data to make critical funding decisions.

Sacramento, CA - On Wednesday, October 25, 2023, over 35 digital equity advocates from the California Alliance for Digital Equity, #OaklandUndivided, and Digital Equity Los Angeles hosted a demonstration to protest the State's looming decision to divert billions of dollars in broadband infrastructure funding intended for the least connected communities to some of the wealthiest neighborhoods in California.

Advocates protested outside the California Broadband Council (CBC) meeting to express their outrage with the California Department of Technology (CDT) and California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) regarding plans to divest from low income communities as part of SB 156 Broadband for ALL implementation. Advocates subsequently provided public comment at the meeting, directly addressing Council members tasked with overseeing this historic investment, including CDT Director Liana Bailey-Crimmins, Senator Steven Bradford, CPUC President Alice Reynolds, and Assemblymember Mike Gipson.

"The decisions made in recent months, in particular around middle mile plans and what is currently funded, have left our communities anxious about being marginalized even further in the digital divide," said Sophia Sandoval, who provided public comment on behalf of Communities in Schools of Los Angeles at the meeting. "[We] urge both the Governor and this committee to ensure that the already allocated 4 billion dollars go to the highest need areas first, not last…the time to act is now."

Recently, state regulators abruptly decided to veer away from the original intention of Governor Newsom and the Broadband for ALL plan by divesting tens of millions of dollars from unserved Oakland neighborhoods and neighborhoods in South Los Angeles, as well as farmworker and other disadvantaged communities in rural areas across the state. These Black and brown communities had been designated as priorities for nearly two years, but were suddenly divested from without any publicly available data, analysis, or explanation. While only 17% of the statewide network was proposed to be cut, Oakland's proposed network was slashed by approximately 56% and South Los Angeles by 77%. This translates into a $28 million divestment in public dollars from two of the least connected communities in the state.

"We're in a digital age, so the internet is no longer a luxury, it's a necessity to the growth of families and without it will worsen the disparities amongst Oakland neighborhoods," said Amber Johnson, a student from Oakland Youth Commission, during public comment. "We're not asking for handouts to Oakland, we're asking

for the State to commit to creating a State Broadband Map that isn't discriminatory. We want you to work in partnership with people who actually know what's best for our community."

The areas CDT and the CPUC chose to cut were determined by the State Broadband Map which is supposed to show who has access to the internet and who doesn't, but this map is fiction. This map relies on invalidated, self-reported information from corporate, profit-driven Internet Service Providers (ISPs). As a result, the State Broadband Map systematically prioritizes wealthy communities—many that already enjoy multiple options for affordable high-speed internet—at the expense of communities deemed uneconomic and bypassed by private broadband investment for decades. State regulators' continued reliance on the flawed State Broadband Map has negatively impacted a number of state broadband projects to date, including CDT's $4 billion Middle Mile Broadband Initiative (MMBI) and the CPUC's $2 billion Federal Funding Account Last Mile Program.

"Unfortunately, the State Broadband Map erases the needs of our communities," said Ulises Zatarain, the Executive Director of Tech Exchange in public comment. "We're asking that you reinstate middle mile investment in California's least connected communities and work with us, the folks who know these communities well, to develop a map that captures the lived experience of our students, families, and our community members."

Decisions about how and where to spend nearly $4 billion in public funds for CDT's MMBI have been made without any publicly available data, analysis, or explanation. The extent to which CDT has executed on these secret decisions about nearly $4 billion in public spending has also been hidden from public view. According to a recent CalMatters article, CDT has already spent $1.8 billion on lease, purchase and joint-build agreements for the MMBI, including leases for infrastructure in Beverly Hills and West L.A. While multiple changes have been made to the State Broadband Map since its initial release, it is up to communities to scour the map to figure out what the changes were. There is no more documentation than an "Updated by" date at the very bottom of a webpage.

"Our communities are consistently left unheard and left with a feeling of disregard," said Alessandro Negrete, a Los Angeles-based advocate from Alliance for a Better Community, who also provided public comment at the meeting. "We must address the situation to ensure fair and equitable access to the resources that were initially promised and that there is a transparent process with accountability moving forward."

At this Wednesday's meeting, advocates demanded equity, accountability, and a renewed commitment to center and uplift community in the various state broadband projects underway. Additionally, advocates are urging the State to uncouple funding from demonstrably inaccurate maps and prioritize the most disconnected, highest poverty communities first. Advocates are greatly concerned that the use of bad data and lack of transparency will continue as the CPUC administers the upcoming Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program, in which nearly $2 billion has been allocated to California by the federal government to expand internet access.

In her closing remarks at the Wednesday meeting, CDT Director Bailey-Crimmins stated, "we are committed to providing technology and to have more transparency. It's not what we say, it's what we do that people remember… and California is looking at us to make sure that the actions are in alignment with what we're trying to achieve, which is broadband for all."

Previous developments in this story were featured in the [San Francisco Chronicle](#), [Mercury News](#), [KCBS Radio](#), the [L.A. Times](#), and [CalMatters](#).

High-resolution graphics, photos, and videos from the event can be found [here](#).
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About the California Alliance for Digital Equity

The [California Alliance for Digital Equity (CADE)](#) is a group of local and statewide advocates dedicated to advancing all forms of digital equity, from device acquisition to broadband access to digital literacy. We believe every Californian deserves access to fast, reliable, and affordable internet to effectively navigate the digital world. A fast connection without bandwidth or data limitations, coupled with technical support, is a civil right—not a luxury. CADE is currently comprised of ten non-profit and philanthropic partners - including Digital Equity Los Angeles Coalition and #OaklandUndivided - that work together to advance the alliance's statewide priorities.