

News > [California News](#) • News

San Jose set to launch new fund to bring home internet to thousands of residents



More than 95,000 San Jose residents do not have internet access at home



George Avalos / Bay Area News Group

San Jose City Hall. Downtown San Jose has become the focal point of a shopping spree for properties that has rocketed far above the \$1 billion mark over the past year. George Avalos / Bay Area News Group

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The city moved to change that on Tuesday, creating the San Jose Digital Inclusion Fund — the largest of its kind in the country. The aim? To bring broadband access to some 50,000 households over the next decade and teach residents who may be new to the web the digital skills they need to navigate it.

“There’s so little awareness in San Jose of the digital divide,” said Dolan Beckel in the city’s Office of Civic Innovation and Digital Strategy.

Now, the city estimates that around 95,000 residents have no internet access at home.

For seniors, the initiative might mean learning how to navigate a healthcare website that allows them to talk to their doctor more easily. For students, it might mean the ability to file a homework assignment or apply for a job online without having to trek to a Starbucks parking lot or someplace else with free wireless.

Longterm, the city wants to close what Mayor Sam Liccardo on Tuesday called a “palpable” digital divide — a divide that right now means the opportunities Silicon Valley has to offer are out of reach for many residents. As Google and other tech giants look to San Jose to grow their businesses, the city wants to produce students and young people capable of filling new jobs.

“Many lack resources that I believe everyone should have access to,” said Meilyn Wong, a junior at Lincoln High School.

The city will partner with the nonprofit California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) to manage the \$24 million initiative, which will be funded by the small cell usage fees telecommunications companies pay.

“Digital inclusion is a 21st century civil right,” said Sunne Wright McPeak, the president and CEO of CETF.

San Jose is “the pathfinder in our state,” Wright McPeak said, praising the city for its “vision and leadership” on the issue.

To increase connectivity, the city is planning a number of grants and programs, including expanding programs to give refurbished and donated computers to low-income families. CETF is aiming to grant the first \$1 million by the fall of 2019.

Liccardo hopes the model “will be copied throughout the country,” he said.

“It’s an opportunity to teach a man how to fish,” Councilman Johnny Khamis said, “instead of providing him with a fish.”

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