

NEWS

San Jose Teams Up with East Side Schools to Close 'Digital Divide'

By [Grace Hase](#) @grace_hase / 24 hours ago

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Based on 2018-19 enrollment data, roughly 1.2 million children in California lack digital access. (Photo by Jovica Varga, via Shutterstock)

The East Side Union High School District and the city of [San Jose](https://www.sanjoseinside.com/tag/sanjosecitycouncil/) are close to identifying enough funding to expand wifi around five neighborhood schools.

At Tuesday's virtual City Council meeting, East Side Union Superintendent Chris Funk revealed that his district may be able to accelerate the timeline of the program called Access East Side. The initiative, which aims to bring internet connection to some of the city's poorest households, was launched in 2016 but ramped up once the pandemic forced school kids into distance learning.

Thankfully, the city got a bit of a head start.

In October 2017, SmartWAVE Technologies finished installing access nodes and radios for wifi connection on 200 street lights in neighborhoods surrounding James Lick High. Installations in the Overfelt High area are expected to be completed next month, while work around Yerba Buena High should wrap up by January.

But the coronavirus pandemic has created an urgency for San Jose leaders to speed up their efforts in closing the "digital divide" as schools move to online learning. At a May 5 council meeting, city officials reported that 11,600 San Jose students lack a device for distance learning and 8,574 have no internet.

On Tuesday, Funk said his district's board plans to pass a resolution next week to sell a new round of technology bonds. He said the district should have the money by July to complete work at Independence, Oak Grove and Andrew Hill high schools. City officials plan to bring back a spending plan in the coming weeks that would also include Silver Creek and Mount Pleasant high schools.

Besides the cost of ongoing maintenance, the city has identified a \$600,000 funding gap that they need to close in order to complete work around Independence and Oak Grove high schools. In a May 16 memo, San Jose Public Library Director Jill Bourne—who's leading the city's digital inclusion efforts—said San Jose will get up to \$2 million in grants to support "the design and construction of the community wifi network."

Though city officials have worked for the last four years on closing internet connectivity gaps in East San Jose, Vice Mayor Chappie Jones said he's concerned about the lack of strategy for when the school year starts up again in the fall.

"My anticipation is that schools are not going to be allowed to open in August," he said via Zoom on Tuesday. "Once the school year starts and we have literally thousands of students who do not have access to an education, my concern is that I still want to see a plan that's going to address when school opens [and] how those kids are going to get an education or access to online learning."

Bourne responded by saying that the solution is to build on San Jose's existing digital inclusion efforts—and that might look different in various parts of the city.

"We're really hoping to move forward with East Side [and] get that going," she said. "I think some of the other solutions that we presented we will be able to come back and say 'well this solution will help us in this area of the city.'"

Mayor Sam Liccardo, who's made closing the digital divide one of his signature policies, added that San Jose needs to "acknowledge what we have today is not enough resources"

"Obviously we're going to do everything we can to find more resources," he told his colleagues. "It would be hard for folks to really articulate a clear strategy without knowing exactly where those resources are."

The San Jose City Council also voted unanimously to amend the city's contract with the California Emerging Technology Fund, which is tasked with distributing money donated to the digital inclusion effort. The contract change sets off a process that will ultimately divvy up the nearly \$63,000 raised for closing connectivity gaps. Some 139 laptops and tablets and 200 cell phones were also donated to the effort.

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