

Lawmakers look for new ways to pay for broadband in rural California

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Woodlake Unified erected four cell phone towers to connect students with district Wi-Fi from home.

California voters could see a new bond proposal on the ballot this November that would pay for broadband infrastructure in rural California — areas that have struggled to provide students with appropriate devices and internet access during the coronavirus pandemic.

In the last two months, state leaders have rushed to [distribute Chromebooks](#) to California students and made [direct pleas](#) to internet service companies to provide free service for students while campuses remain closed. But still, many students across the state have been unable to participate in distance learning because they [lack access](#) to the internet and computers at home.

Assemblyman Al Muratsuchi, D-Torrance, is now putting forward the California Broadband Infrastructure and Distance Learning Bond Act of 2020 in response to those ongoing challenges. The proposal came following Gov. Gavin Newsom's [May revision](#) of the state budget proposal, which included a 10% cut — about \$6.5 billion — to the Local Control Funding Formula, which comprises about 80% of state funding for K-12 schools.

The bond could be in the range of \$3 billion to \$4 billion, but exact details are still being discussed, Muratsuchi said. In addition to building fiber cables and other necessary infrastructure in the most remote parts of the state, the funding would help purchase computers and pay for professional training for teachers on how to effectively use technology for instruction.

“The pandemic has exposed the social inequities in our state, not only along the lines of race and class but also in terms of geography. This digital divide is clearly highlighting the lack of access to high speed internet in low-income communities, communities of color and rural communities,” Muratsuchi said, referring to the gap between those with access to the internet and those without.

Education leaders have expressed [concerns](#) about learning loss and further widening of the persistent gap in test scores between white and Asian students and their black and Latino peers, known as the achievement gap, during distance learning. One major hurdle to

ensuring students can connect with their teachers and not fall behind while schools are closed is a lack of access to technology, in particular for low-income students and those in rural parts of the state.

In March, state education officials put out a call to help procure enough devices for all California students to continue with school at home while campuses are closed during the coronavirus pandemic. But a wide gap in technology access remains. On Wednesday, state education officials reported that there is still a need for nearly 750,000 laptops and 323,000 hotspots.

Some districts have also reported that hotspots don't work in areas that lack cell service — highlighting an even broader challenge of underlying infrastructure issues to connect mobile hotspots to the internet in regions that telecommunications and internet companies don't serve.

“We are talking about infrastructure here, not only infrastructure for distance learning, but for our economy. And that should be the state's responsibility,” Muratsuchi said.

Whether or not the bond appears on the ballot in November will depend on a number of factors. Some bonds don't require voter approval, and the type of bond that Muratsuchi is proposing is still under discussion, according to Kerry Jacob, communications director for Muratsuchi.

“Revenue bonds have the interest carried in the financing package,” and do not require voter approval, said Sunne Wright McPeak, president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, a statewide nonprofit whose mission is to close the digital divide.

McPeak's organization is also advocating for reforms to the California Advanced Services Fund, which provides grants to internet companies to build broadband infrastructure in underserved areas. The broadband infrastructure bond could be one tool to fund the program.

In 2017, California passed the Internet for All Act, a law that authorized the California Advanced Services Fund to collect \$66 million per year through 2022 via [surcharges](#) and taxes on telecommunications services. McPeak and others are now proposing that the Legislature extend collection through 2028 and increase the funding amount from \$66 million to \$100 million per year to keep up with increasing internet needs and grant applications from service providers.

The California Emerging Technology Fund is supporting the bond proposal along with the California School Boards Association, which sent a [letter](#) to Newsom on April 29 that included a call for a \$2 billion broadband infrastructure bond on the November ballot.

If the bond proposal makes it to the November ballot, it's unclear if it would receive broad support. California voters recently [rejected](#) a \$15 billion school construction bond, Proposition 13, in the March state election. And economists are already predicting a sustained major economic downturn in California following the pandemic.

Some proponents for increased broadband are also concerned that a statewide solution could overlook regional differences in infrastructure needs, such as how mountainous terrain has different challenges than rural farmland in connecting to the internet.

“Topography for Wi-Fi is everything. I'm not sure this translates in California to how they will look at those solutions,” said Kelly L. Salter, senior program officer for children, youth and education at the McConnell Foundation in Redding that is also working to address local broadband needs.

Supporters of the bond proposal are optimistic about its success.

“The last bond measure was developed before a pandemic. There wasn't the benefit of seeing the needs of distance learning, and the voters can see all of that now,” said McPeak, referring to Prop. 13. “We need to pivot to the future so we can also close the achievement gap as well.”

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