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COVERING CALIFORNIA GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

OPINION

Charter-Cox merger is a chance for California to score a win

BY ***SUNNE WRIGHT McPEAK*** POSTED 07.16.2026

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OPINION — The Charter Communications acquisition of Cox Communications is another major opportunity for California to close the Digital Divide.

The combined company will improve Internet services for 62% of all California residents and millions of businesses. It will offer affordable Internet service to 66% of all low-income households in the state.

These public benefits are guaranteed through legally-binding agreements between Charter Communications and the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) Public Advocates Office (Cal Advocates) upon timely approval of the acquisition by the commission.

Credit goes to the CPUC for pioneering the concept of public benefits agreements, again leading the nation in closing the Digital Divide.

The commission first seized upon the strategy of securing enforceable public benefits from communications companies as a condition of corporate consolidations 20 years ago when it established CETF as a statewide non-profit to accelerate broadband deployment and adoption.

Since then, CETF has followed that leadership tradition to negotiate public benefits agreements on 5 previous corporate transactions that totaled billions of dollars in Internet infrastructure construction, new affordable Internet offers for low-income households, and more than $122 million for Digital Inclusion.

These negotiated public benefits are far beyond what the State of California, taxpayers, and customers otherwise could afford.

The CETF-Charter Public Benefits Agreement requires $275 million to be invested in upgrading the Charter-Cox networks to symmetrical gigabit speeds within 3 years throughout their service areas. This will be 10-times faster than the current standard of the Federal Communications Commission.

Charter also will provide high-speed WiFi service at 50 anchor institutions and community facilities in their current service areas and honor the existing Cox service to WiFi public locations in the City of San Diego.

The CETF and Cal Advocates settlements secured new affordable offers for the next 5 years—$20 per month for 100/20 Mbps and $50 per month for 500/20 Mbps. In addition, Charter has agreed to participate in the CPUC Home Broadband LifeLine Pilot Project and any substantially-similar successor program.

The combination of the new $20 per month subscription coupled with participation in LifeLine can achieve no-cost Internet service for a low-income family. Charter will invest $1.5 million to promote these new afford Internet opportunities.

In addition, Charter will dedicate $27.5 million for community-based organizations, public agencies, Regional Broadband Consortia, and the City of San Diego to conduct outreach, increase public awareness, and help 100,000 low-income households enroll in affordable Internet service and become digitally-proficient.

While CETF will manage the Digital Inclusion investment, all funds will be direct grants and expenditures for Digital Inclusion. Charter also stepped up with another $2.5 million to support the California Green Technology Initiative (GTI), endorsed by Gov. Newsom and several other public officials, to refurbish retired computers to be awarded to low-income residents completing digital literacy training.

The GTI funds will be split between CETF and partners statewide. This makes Charter's Digital Inclusion commitment total to $30 million.

Now is the time for immediate action to ensure that consumers benefit as soon as possible from the Charter-Cox merger. The commission has conducted a thorough process over the last year and the public record is extensive.

We strongly urge all policymakers and civic leaders to support the commission in making a timely decision to approve the transaction along with the public benefits agreements.

It is consumers who wins!

Sunne Wright McPeak, President and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF).

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