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CETF Commends California Public Utilities Commission for Securing Victory for Consumers in the Unanimous Approval of the Charter-Cox Transaction and Public Benefits Agreements

Public Benefits Agreements Expand Affordable Internet Service, Improve Broadband Infrastructure, Assist 100,000 Low-Income Households, and Strengthen Consumer Protections to Close the Digital Divide

California — The California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) commends the California Public Utilities Commission for the unanimous approval of the Charter-Cox merger transaction that includes the Public Benefits Agreements with CETF and Public Advocates Office (Cal Advocates) that secures another major victory for California consumers. The Commission voted unanimously 5-0 on August 13 to require significant investments by Charter to expand affordable Internet service for low-income families, upgrade Internet speeds across its network, assist 100,000 low-income households enroll in affordable home Internet connections and participate in digital literacy training, and strengthen consumer protections.

“The California Emerging Technology Fund is deeply gratified by the Commission’s unanimous vote,” said Sunne Wright McPeak, President and CEO of CETF. “The Commission’s approval transforms this major corporate consolidation into an unprecedented package of concrete, measurable, and enforceable public benefits. These commitments will make high-speed Internet more affordable, bring a hundred thousand low-income households online, make available discounted electronic devices to them, upgrade broadband infrastructure in the legacy Charter areas to 1 gigabit speeds, provide 50 public WiFi hotspots at community anchor locations in Charter Cox service territory, and help close the Digital Divide in California.”

The CETF settlement alone secures more than \$313 million in specified investments, contributions, and consumer outreach coupled with significant service and accountability commitments. Major public-interest benefits include:

- **Affordable Internet for Low-Income Households:** Charter will offer eligible new and existing customers a standalone 100/20 Mbps home Internet plan for \$20 per month for five years. The price will remain fixed, except for government-imposed taxes and fees, with no long-term contract or termination fee. Existing Cox customers enrolled in low-income plans also will be able to remain on those plans for at least five years if eligible.
- **A \$30 Million Investment in Digital Inclusion:** Charter will provide \$30 million over five years to CETF for grants to community organizations, public agencies, and Regional Broadband Consortia to enroll 100,00 low-income households in affordable Internet service, deliver digital literacy training, assist schools implement School2Home, public information through community and ethnic media, and expansion of the California Green Technology Initiative to refurbish and distribute lower-cost computing devices.

- **Better Enrollment Assistance and Community Outreach:** Charter will train its residential call center sales agents to accurately explain and facilitate enrollment in affordable Internet offerings. It also will spend at least \$300,000 annually for five years promoting those affordable offerings, including outreach through trusted community organizations and in-language and in-culture media.
- **Investment in Faster and more Reliable Networks:** Charter will invest at least \$275 million within three years to upgrade its legacy California network so it is capable of offering symmetrical Internet speeds of up to 1 Gbps. The settlement establishes annual construction milestones, reporting requirements, and an \$8.25 million performance bond to help ensure completion.
- **Support for Rural and Underserved Communities:** The settlement provides a backstop for eligible unserved and underserved locations in the Charter California service territory. If California fails to receive a final BEAD infrastructure award, Charter must pursue qualifying State or federal funding to extend last-mile broadband infrastructure to approximately 6,000 unserved locations. Charter also will consult with Regional Broadband Consortia, local planning organizations, community groups, and affected Tribal governments regarding broadband deployment.
- **Free Community Internet Access:** Charter will provide free 500/20 Mbps Internet to enable free public WiFi service for five years to 50 eligible California community anchor institutions—schools, libraries, senior centers, youth centers—in Charter service areas.
- **Additional Protections for California Internet Consumers:** CETF strongly applauds the companion settlement negotiated by Cal Advocates which establishes additional California LifeLine broadband and bundled-service options and caps statewide promotional prices for new residential customers for three years, subject to defined exceptions. Cal Advocates estimates that its affordability and promotional-pricing protections could provide California consumers with savings of up to \$1.9 billion.
- **\$7 Million Charter Investment in California Communities and Workers:** Charter will invest \$5 million through Community Development Financial Institutions to expand access to capital for undercapitalized small businesses in disadvantaged communities. It also will contribute \$2 million to expand its VetConnect workforce training program to two additional California military bases and will continue supplier-diversity outreach, data collection, and reporting.

The Commission's decision marks the sixth major telecommunications consolidation proceeding in which CETF has participated to secure “appropriate, fair, and comparable” public benefits to bring Internet to all California residents. “CETF has consistently maintained that telecommunications consolidations should bring lasting public benefits to do their part to bridge the Digital Divide,” McPeak said. “Today’s decision validates that principle. We thank Assigned Commissioner Matt Baker, President John Reynolds, Commissioners Darcie Houck, Karen Douglas, Christine Harada, and their advisors, assigned Administrative Law Judge Jamie Ormond, Cal Advocates, Charter, Cox, and our many community, regional, and Tribal partners and supporters who helped keep the needs of low-income, rural, and underserved Californians at the center of this proceeding.”

This action by the Commission continues its historical trailblazing in requiring public benefit commitments as a condition of corporate consolidations, which was established in 2005 in the establishment of CETF as a Public Benefit when SBC acquired AT&T and Verizon acquired MCI. The six Public Benefits Agreements negotiated by CETF in the last 11 years have resulted in billions of dollars of investments to build broadband infrastructure throughout California and assist more than 1 million low-income households get connected to the Internet with digital skills to improve their lives. In addition, CETF has awarded more than \$90 million in grants to 142 community-based organizations and public agencies and implemented School2Home in almost 60 schools serving more than 75,000 students and their parents.

CETF looks forward to working with Charter, Cal Advocates, the Commission, and community partners throughout California to ensure that these commitments are implemented promptly, transparently, and with accountability for results.

About the California Emerging Technology Fund

The California Emerging Technology Fund is a statewide nonprofit organization whose mission is to close the Digital Divide, promote Digital Inclusion, and achieve Digital Equity by accelerating the deployment and adoption of broadband and other advanced communications services in unserved and underserved communities. CETF brings together government, industry, regional organizations, schools, and community-based organizations to achieve measurable results. www.cetfund.org

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