



# Memorandum

**TO:** CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** Councilmember Sylvia Arenas  
Councilmember Magdalena Carrasco  
Councilmember Maya Esparza

**SUBJECT:** SEE BELOW

**DATE:** April 17, 2020

Approved

*Sylvia Arenas*

*Magdalena Carrasco*

*Maya Esparza*

Date

*April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

**SUBJECT: UPDATE ON DIGITAL ACCESS AND INCLUSION FOR SCHOOLS DURING COVID-19**

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Request City Administration take the following actions and return to council on May 5<sup>th</sup> with updates on:

1. What it would take to prioritize and quickly expand community Wi-Fi in San Jose, including:
  - a. What would it take to substantially accelerate the planned deployment of Access East Side to Yerba Buena High School?
  - b. What would it take to rapidly add additional schools, including expanding Access East Side and potentially bringing this model to other areas that face similar need?
  - c. What would be needed to invest in immediate solutions as part of our emergency COVID response, that address the lack of internet access in targeted communities?
2. Coordination with Santa Clara County and the Santa Clara County Office of Education on areas for expanded collaboration – and specifically on strategies to identify reimbursable funding streams to San Jose or a partner agency, in collaboration with the consultants supporting our COVID-19 reimbursement funding strategies.
3. Work with the Santa Clara County Office of Education and school districts in San Jose, requesting a report on students' emergency access to laptops and other web ready devices, gaps in online access, and distance learning plans. Request the underlying need

they've assessed and the steps necessary in their districts to achieve universal access for students.

4. Request that the administration support efforts to outreach to private internet providers with suggested changes to their COVID-19 responses processes and end-dates.
5. Update Council on the role that digital inclusion fund grantees are playing in the COVID response and the role that community fundraising can play in the response.

## **BACKGROUND**

Even before COVID-19 upended our community, San Jose faced a glaring digital divide that has threatened to cruelly compound the income inequality that our community has faced for generations.

In 2017, the Mayor's Office of Technology and Innovation commissioned a study in partnership with Stanford University and Community Impact Labs to better understand the digital divide in San Jose. They found that 95,000 residents of our city lack reliable access – including 18% of all families.

These families are facing an existential crisis. They cannot work, they cannot send their children to school, and they will struggle to see their doctors who are now relying on telemedicine. 72% of our children are beginning the process of adjusting to online education, but the 18% of families without access will simply be left behind if we – as a community – do not find solutions.

Thankfully, we are not alone in this effort. From the school districts, to the County Office of Education, to the County Administration, CETF, and our many non-profit partners, there is a wide array of organizations stepping up to meet this challenge. This memo asks the City Administration to bring back to council updates in two weeks about what it would take to quickly work to move the needle with innovative new solutions and expanded investment in our current strategies.

And the city has already been working on these questions, working on a Citywide Community Wi-Fi Strategy and partnering with East Side Union High School District to create Access East Side, which will be soon deploying community Wi-Fi to its second high school service area, with a third planned next.

An update on our Community Wi-Fi Strategy that included potential funding options for the Yerba Buena portion of Access East Side was originally scheduled to come to Council on January 7, 2020. The community served by Yerba Buena High School includes many of the poorest and most overcrowded neighborhoods in the county, and many, if not most, of these students lack broadband access at home. Even for those who have it, overcrowded living conditions often strain bandwidth limitations. What was already a significant inequity has now become a crisis, as these students are unable to access the web learning resources they need to continue their education.

Unfortunately this crisis is not unique to Yerba Buena, nor to the East Side, as many of our communities throughout the city live in poverty. The Santa Clara County Office of Education has noted that every single school district in our county has had a shortage of the needed computers for every student to have access at home since the county's schools were closed on March 13. They have also noted that at our current rate of acquisition and distribution, it would take nearly a year to get sufficient hot spot devices to meet the needs in our communities. We know that many of the same students without digital access rely on free and reduced lunch programs. For these communities, which overlap significantly with our known digital deserts, temporary mobile hot spot measures simply will not be enough. Our students cannot afford to wait a year for digital access.

The digital divide is only going to deepen as we move into the next school year, as our schools prepare to adapt to this "new normal," and students who were already at high risk of being left behind will face insurmountable obstacles to their education.

We pride ourselves on being the "Capital of Silicon Valley," and if we unite with our partners in the tech sector, and in the community, we have another opportunity to lead the state, and the nation, in developing innovative solutions to close our digital divide. Now is the time for us to act to ensure that the children of our most vulnerable communities will not be left behind, and will be able to continue their education as we navigate this unprecedented crisis.