

'Jarring' internet access survey results embolden leaders of citywide broadband

By [Joshua Sabatini](#) on June 5, 2017 1:00 am

Another sobering look at the lack of internet access for many San Francisco residents shows students' work impacted and costs as a barrier, bolstering a citywide fiber broadband initiative to connect every home and business to the internet.

Nearly 30 percent of the 1,100 San Francisco seniors, students and affordable housing residents surveyed say they do not have internet access and, of those, 60 percent said cost was the main factor. A majority said The City should play a lead role in providing internet service.

While the results are in line with what past studies have found, the recent data has inspired strong reactions from those working to create a citywide fiber service.

"The responses to a few questions in particular were even more jarring than I would have imagined," said Supervisor Mark Farrell, who is leading the initiative.

The survey was part of a community panel Farrell established with former Supervisor Eric Mar to tap the wisdom of advocates who have long worked on the issue and solicit feedback from residents most impacted by the lack of internet access.

"We have a much better picture. But it's not a pretty picture," Farrell said.

Among some of the more salient results was that of the 68 school-age youth surveyed, 61 percent answered “yes” to the question, “Has the lack of internet access ever prevented you or almost prevented you from completing a school, extracurricular, or work assignment?”

Brian Purchia, co-founder of CivicMakers, a consulting firm involved in the discussions that began holding events three years ago to raise awareness of the lack of internet access in San Francisco, called the recent survey results “eye opening!” in a text message.

“Every San Francisco student should be able to do their homework at home,” he wrote. “This should be a wake-up call.”

The survey also raises questions about whether eligible residents are able to benefit from existing low-income programs that offer subsidized services like Comcast’s Internet Essentials program. That’s because of those surveyed, 70 percent said they pay more than \$40 for internet service, only 6 percent are enrolled in free internet service and 10 percent pay less than \$20.

“It goes to show that the programs in place simply aren’t working,” Farrell said. “We need to do better.”

While the survey documents the need and builds the case for San Francisco to provide internet service, discussions continue about what model to use to roll out such a program, including a funding plan.

Of those asked, “What do you think the MAIN role for The City should be with respect to broadband access?” half of respondents said The City should “install state-of-the-art network and offer services to the public,” and another 15 percent said The City should install such a network and lease it “to competing private companies to offer services to the public.” Just 5 percent said city government should play no role. Twenty-four percent answered

“don't know.”

How to create a fiber optic broadband network connecting all businesses and residences has yet to occur in a U.S. city as large as San Francisco. Different models are being examined with the help of Maryland-based consultant CTC Technology and Energy, and reports related to the model analysis are expected to be issued in the coming months.

“The opportunities to lease out [municipal] dark fiber to various people in the private sector are large,” Farrell said. “There is a lot of variables that will go into how we finance this, the different options that we will have to choose from.”

Eric Brooks, a campaign coordinator for a group called Our City SF, said the survey supports his call “to make this public broadband internet system fully public from the start.”

Brooks said internet service should be viewed as a public utility but said The City must avoid a situation where corporations have control over it, such as the situation with PG&E and electricity. “We must not repeat that mistake by handing any part of our community internet to a large corporation.”

Farrell is not taking a position on the model at this point. “Regardless of the methods we choose, so long as we stick to the core values that I have laid forth from day one, publicly-owned asset, open access network, strictest privacy policies and now, in particular, in opposition to Donald Trump, abiding by net neutrality ... So long as those criteria are met, I am open to any method to get there.”

The Department of Technology, which is involved in the citywide broadband initiative, currently manages 240 miles of fiber-optic cable connecting 387 city facilities, of which 30 were added this fiscal year. The department plans

to connect all 450 city facilities by 2021 and has received funding for the effort in Mayor Ed Lee's \$10.1 billion budget proposal.

In recent years, The City has increased free wireless internet access in parks, plazas and public libraries. The mayor's budget also includes funding for installing high-speed internet at up to 10 recreation centers and swimming pools next fiscal year.

A public hearing before the Board of Supervisors Land Use and Transportation Committee on the survey results, which will be updated with results from additional surveys, is scheduled for June 26.

Farrell has committed to having a citywide broadband plan in place before he is termed out of office at the end of next year.

The mayor remains supportive of the effort.

"The mayor continues to advocate on the national stage against the FCC rollbacks of net neutrality and whole-heartedly supports our local efforts to bring fast and affordable internet to every resident and business in San Francisco through a municipal broadband," mayoral spokesperson Ellen Canale said in an email.

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