

New Mexico Senate passes bill for new broadband office

By Walt Rubel-Southern New Mexico Journalism Collaborative • Mar 4, 2021



LAS CRUCES - Millions of federal dollars are available to expand broadband Internet access in New Mexico, but the state can't tap into that money until it has a plan, Senate Finance Committee Chairman George Muñoz, D-Gallup, told his fellow lawmakers.

Senate Bill 93, which passed the Senate on a 33-6 vote Wednesday, March 3, is intended to fix that problem. It

would create the New Mexico Office of Broadband Access and Expansion, which would be responsible for evaluating the current system and coordinating its growth.

“The office is going to document the New Mexico broadband plan, something we do across about 17 different departments right now,” said sponsor Sen. Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque. “This is going to tie everything together and make it easier to see what’s going on with broadband here in New Mexico,” he said.

The bill would also create the Broadband Access and Expansion Fund, which would have money appropriated to it on an annual basis to help pay for new projects throughout the state. Padilla said the contribution this year would be between \$55 million and \$135 million.

The office would take that state money and use it to leverage federal funds, earning as much as a tenfold return, he said.

Muñoz said the latest federal stimulus package includes \$979 million to improve broadband access, but he said the state doesn't have anyone working on a broadband plan.

“People need to know the truth. There’s \$979 million available, but there is no broadband plan. For us to tap into those resources, we have to have that plan,” he said. “This plan has to happen immediately. We should have been

working on it yesterday, so those kids are not sitting in their cars doing homework.

“How do we get \$2 billion out of \$133 million? Come up with a plan,” said Muñoz, who is chair of the Senate Finance Committee.

According to the fiscal impact report on the bill, the state has made significant investments in broadband recently, including \$10 million for Cochiti Pueblo and \$2.1 million for Sierra County in 2019. The USDA has announced \$20 million for Eddy, Chaves, Lea, Lincoln, Otero, Cibola and Sierra counties through its ReConnect program. And, the Federal Communications Commission has invested \$165 million to build infrastructure in the state.

But there is nobody coordinating these various projects and ensuring accountability.

Padilla said the new office, which would be housed in the Department of Information Technology, would do a thorough assessment of the state’s existing technology to better understand where the gaps are. It would then work with both local and federal partners to bring service to areas where it is not now available.

Sen. Gerald Ortiz y Pino, D-Albuquerque, noted that even when rural areas of the state are connected, the service will

still be too expensive for many residents.

"If the families can't afford it, we might as well not have expanded," he said.

Padilla said there are several rural areas in New Mexico in which companies can qualify for subsidies to bring consumer costs down. He said the state Public Regulation Commission would be responsible for setting rates.

The bill originally had a \$950,000 appropriation, but that was removed because of existing money in the budget due to vacancies in the Department of Information Technology that will be used to pay the new salaries.

Padilla has also introduced SB 361, which would allow the state's Rural Universal Service Fund to be used for broadband. That bill has passed its first committee

Padilla said his goal is to provide access to nearly all of the state.

"I envision 98 percent or better," he said.