



## DIGITAL GOVERNANCE SERIES

### **Rural Broadband Funding Opportunities Are Here, Start Acting Now!**

We previously covered how it is critical that counties make themselves as prepared and ready as possible for the pending broadband funding opportunities. This included taking a hard look at your County's broadband infrastructure permitting, environmental review, and project approval processes and timelines. Making them as easy and streamlined as possible, helps to make your county more attractive for broadband construction companies to want to build projects in your community. Counties should have a broadband team in place and have developed an action plan by now for how they want to pursue and support local broadband expansion projects. Your broadband initiatives could include supporting a variety of private sector, public-private partnership, and/or municipal projects.

The money flood gates are starting to open for State and Federal rural broadband programs. As such, now is the time for rural counties to put their plans in motion to capitalize on this once in a generation funding opportunity.

### **Rural County Resource**

Important to note is that helpful resources for rural counties are currently available through Golden State Connect Authority (GSCA). GSCA is a joint powers authority and an affiliate entity of the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), created to assist rural California counties with broadband expansion. Assistance can take many forms from general informational guidance to future turn-key project development. Currently, 38 of RCRC's member counties are also GSCA members. Learn more about them and access helpful resources on broadband, including a list of current State and Federal [Broadband Funding Programs](#), at [GoldenStateConnect.org](http://GoldenStateConnect.org).

### **Key Funding Opportunities**

Time is of the essence in preparing for broadband funding. The following funding programs are listed in the order anticipated for release:

- **\$50 million for the Local Agency Technical Assistance (LATA) program.** The California Public Utility Commission's (CPUC) LATA program provides reimbursement to local agencies, as defined, for activities that support local jurisdictions and tribal governments in their pursuit to provide broadband connectivity to unserved and underserved areas.

LATA funding is provided only for work in preparation for broadband infrastructure projects designed to meet or exceed symmetrical 100 Mbps download and upload speeds. The LATA grant program can award up to \$500,000 through an expedited review process, and an additional \$500,000 through a CPUC resolution process, annually, per local agency. The [CPUC has a supporting LATA website](#) for this program and will be holding webinars in the coming weeks, with the application period anticipated to open in May. This is a wonderful opportunity for your county, so be sure to submit an application.

- Uses could include consultant or staff time for conducting needs assessments, environmental and engineering studies, network design, broadband strategic plans, and costs incurred in forming a Joint Powers Authority for the purpose of bringing broadband to areas in need of sufficient Internet connectivity.
  - Use this program to prepare for applying for the larger dollar opportunities. Get your project shovel ready.
- **\$2 billion for the Federal Funding Account (FFA) last mile grant program - \$1 billion for projects in rural counties and \$1 billion for projects urban counties.** The CPUC has published county allocation amounts for distributing this funding, based on a methodology outlined in its [decision](#). Most RCRC member counties fall in the “rural” allocation but a handful are included in the “urban” allocation. These dollars are for project awards in your county, not exclusively to your County organization. This is the first large amount of funding that is very well suited for fiber to the home projects as it requires symmetric 100Mbps Internet service, among other requirements. The FFA program, although part of the California Advanced Service Fund (CASF) grant program, has its own unique program criteria due to this program’s Federal source of funding originating from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).
    - Funding is reimbursement based for costs from March 3, 2021-December 31,2024; funding must be expended by December 31, 2026.
    - Final FFA program rules were adopted by the CPUC on [April 21, 2022](#).
  - **\$3.25 billion to construct a statewide open-access middle mile network.** In July 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law Senate Bill 156 to create an open-access middle-mile network to bring equitable high-speed broadband service to all Californians. SB 156 provides \$3.25 billion to build the necessary infrastructure to allow for last mile connectivity to homes, businesses, and community institutions. The design and construction of the middle-mile network is monitored by the Middle-Mile Advisory Committee (MMAC). A project website where you can track segment projects across the State is available [here](#). Eighteen initial projects areas were proposed in December 2021 and are in the design process. The proposed Middle Mile Map for the entire state was released on [April 22, 2022](#). The public comment period for counties to provide input and

requests has passed. All projects must be completed by December 2026. However, your county's FFA funding can be used for further middle mile expansion if needed to perform a last mile project.

- **\$750 million for a Loan Loss Reserve fund (LLR).** The LLR supports costs related to the financing of local broadband infrastructure development. The reserve fund expands local governments' ability to secure private financing for building last-mile projects, with an emphasis on the establishment of municipal broadband networks. On March 1, 2022, the CPUC released a Second Amended Scoping Memo and Ruling which included questions for comment on the LLR program. A CPUC staff proposal outlining a draft structure of program rules is expected before August 2022.

A **digital equity strategy** should be part of your broadband initiatives as well, built into your goals and plans. Last month the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began the process to establish rules addressing digital discrimination and equal access to broadband internet service. Additionally, the FCC formed a task force to oversee the development of model policies and best practices that states and local governments can adopt to address digital discrimination in their respective jurisdictions. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which provided \$65 billion for broadband deployment, requires states, as a condition of funding award, to have a Digital Equity Plan. There are several measures moving through the state legislative process to implement the federal IIJA requirements on digital equity, and it is expected before June 2023 the state will need to comply with the federal requirements to receive funding.

The above funding programs are in full motion now and counties need to take action or else they could lose out on maximizing these rare opportunities for their communities. There are other State and Federal broadband programs in play now too, so be sure to review the Broadband Funding Programs document linked previously and found on the GSCA website. RCRC is working hard to assist all rural counties with broadband expansion across California via Golden State Connect Authority. Take advantage of this great resource.

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**AUTHOR**



Steve Monaghan is Nevada County's Chief Information Officer (CIO) responsible for planning, organizing, and directing the county's overall information technology efforts and investments. His efforts have resulted in significant recognitions and awards for his leadership in the IT industry and, during his tenure, Nevada County has received numerous awards for technology leadership and excellence. In addition, Steve created the CSAC/CCISDA County Technology Executive Credential program, serves on the Advisory Board for the California State University, Chico Cybersecurity for Executives program, and serves as a member of RCRC's Broadband Advisory Committee. Find additional information about Steve here and connect with him directly at [steve.monaghan@co.nevada.ca.us](mailto:steve.monaghan@co.nevada.ca.us)