



# County of San Mateo

## Inter-Departmental Correspondence

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**Department:** BOARD OF SUPERVISORS  
**DISTRICT 4**  
**File #:** 20-794

Board Meeting Date: 10/20/2020

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**Special Notice / Hearing:** None  
**Vote Required:** Majority

**To:** Honorable Board of Supervisors  
**From:** Supervisor Warren Slocum, District 4  
Supervisor Don Horsley, District 3  
**Subject:** Expansion of the Public Internet Connectivity Pilot Project

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Adopt a resolution:

- A) Approving a \$3,500,000 allocation of Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds to expand the "Public Internet Connectivity Pilot Project" to improve high-speed internet access and provide technology tools for disadvantaged students; and
- B) Authorizing the County Manager, or designee, to negotiate, enter into, and/or amend agreements to expand the Public Internet Pilot Project to additional school districts up to a total amount not to exceed \$3,500,000 which amount(s) must be incurred no later than December 30, 2020.

### **BACKGROUND:**

According to the United Nations, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history. (See Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond, found at [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf).) Even in San Mateo County, which is in the heart of Silicon Valley, the proliferation of students engaged in distance learning has revealed significant internet connectivity challenges for school districts, especially those serving students in vulnerable communities.

In June 2020, the County Office of Education conducted a countywide survey of all school districts to determine the extent of the internet connectivity need and found that 4,411 elementary and high school students did not have access to laptops and/or WIFI connectivity in their homes.

While the State and County move toward reopening business activities, the number of identified

COVID-19 cases continues to grow; in fact, as of October 13, 2020, there were 855,072 confirmed positive COVID-19 cases in California and 10,622 cases in the County, and experts have predicted another possible spike in cases over the coming months.

Thus, it will likely take time before schools are able to fully reopen-and even if they do reopen, there is no guarantee they will remain open for the entirety of the 2020-2021 school year-which means that distance learning will likely continue in some form for the foreseeable future. For this reason, expanding WIFI connectivity for our students now is critical, as connectivity will allow students to stay in or near their homes and securely connect to the internet so they can effectively engage in distance learning.

On August 4, 2020, the County Board of Supervisors approved an allocation of \$2,879,010 in Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds to establish an internet connectivity pilot project to help students in the following four school districts effectively engage in distance learning: La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District, Ravenswood City School District, Redwood City School District, and Sequoia Union High School District (“Project”).

The goal of the Project is to improve high-speed internet access for disadvantaged students in the four participating school districts and provide internet access for more than 1,200 students living in East Palo Alto, Redwood City, and unincorporated San Mateo County in the communities of La Honda, Loma Mar, Pescadero, and San Gregorio through mobile “Hotspots”, Comcast internet, in-home connectivity support when other connectivity solutions are not available.

In addition to the County’s efforts in addressing student connectivity issues during the COVID-19 pandemic, the San Mateo County Libraries, which are governed by the San Mateo County Library Joint Powers Authority, have purchased over 900 mobile hotspots and over 70 laptops/Chromebooks for free check-out to members since the pandemic started. The Libraries are also expanding access to free public WIFI at their facilities to include parking lots and exterior spaces.

#### **DISCUSSION:**

It is recommended that the Board of Supervisors approve an additional allocation of \$3,500,000 in CARES Act funds to expand the Project to additional school districts with students who have significant connectivity needs through technological improvements to facilitate distance learning in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency. The goal of this phase will be to improve internet connectivity and the effectiveness of distance learning for an additional 1,500 disadvantaged students. The expanded connectivity effort will involve the distribution of mobile hotspots, free public WIFI in selected neighborhoods, and, potentially, the distribution of laptops/Chromebooks, as needed.

Based on existing student connectivity data gathered by the County Office of Education, this phase of the Program will initially assist students in Daly City, the City of South San Francisco and the City of San Mateo. The County Office of Education is currently updating its student connectivity survey and, once received, the updated data will be overlaid with neighborhood equity measures to prioritize the inclusion of additional students potentially in other cities up to the available funding.

Since expenses for use of CARES Act funds must be incurred by December 30, 2020, time is of the essence. Staff will work with each of the selected school districts to develop cost estimates and to identify the specific connectivity needs for students. Moreover, given its role in expanding student connectivity and its existing vendor contracts, the San Mateo County Libraries have agreed to

potentially partner with the County in the procurement and distribution of mobile hotspots and laptops/ Chromebooks. Granting the County Manager, or designee, the authority to amend current consultant and/or equipment vendor agreements and to potentially create a new agreement with the San Mateo County Library Joint Powers Authority will allow the work necessary to expand the proposed Project to begin immediately.

Staff will provide a report to the Board at its November 10, 2020 meeting, including an update on the plans for the funded districts, the status of agreements, and the timeline for distribution of allocated CARES Act funds.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

There is no fiscal impact on the County General Fund associated with approving this allocation of \$3,500,000 of CARES Act funds to the expansion of the Project.