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STATE & LOCAL POLICYMAKERS' BROADBAND PLANNING TOOL KIT

Best Practices for Holistically Assessing Broadband Markets

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Michael J. Santorelli, Director
Alexander Karras, Senior Fellow

The Advanced Communications Law & Policy Institute
New York Law School

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- With state and local policymakers increasingly interested in understanding the nuts-and-bolts of broadband connectivity, it is essential that they deploy well-designed planning processes to generate the data, insights, and partnerships needed to effectively address any challenges that are identified.
- To assist in these efforts, the ACLP offers high-level best practices that should inform how states and localities deploy holistic broadband assessments.

What are some best practices that might guide and inform holistic assessments of broadband markets by state and local governments?

With state and local policymakers increasingly interested in understanding the array of forces impacting broadband connectivity, it is essential that they deploy well-designed planning processes to generate the data, insights, and partnerships needed to effectively address any challenges that are identified. To assist in these efforts, the following offers high-level best practices that should inform how states and localities deploy holistic broadband assessments.

- **Bring All Stakeholders Together.** A core theme of policymaking at the state and local levels should be inclusiveness and collaboration. It is critically important to solicit the input and help of all relevant stakeholders. This extends to – and is a foundational aspect of – the broadband planning process. Engaging in “closed-door” deliberations or processes that only bring together some stakeholders will yield an incomplete picture of the relevant broadband marketplace and of the competitive and consumer-oriented dynamics therein. The default approach of all broadband-related planning processes should be that of inviting all stakeholders – e.g., ISPs, consumer groups, business groups, nonprofits, philanthropic groups, etc. – to the table for data-driven, solution-oriented discussions.
- **Set the Proper Context.** Planning processes should encompass more than just a static evaluation of a broadband market at a particular moment in time. Rather, policymakers should endeavor to set the proper context for the inquiry by gathering data sufficient to understand how the relevant marketplace has evolved over time. For example, how has broadband availability improved over the last decade? What were consumers’ options for broadband 10 years ago? What speeds were being offered at what price-points, compared to what is being offered today? How has broadband adoption, in general and across specific demographic groups, changed? What demand-side challenges remain? This kind of information is essential to properly situating planning processes against the backdrop of a market’s ongoing evolution and educating stakeholders about the iterative nature of broadband connectivity.

- **Determine Where Broadband Is Headed.** What are the buildout plans of ISPs? Which areas will benefit from subsidized buildout in the near-term (e.g., projects in areas supported by funds from RDOF or BEAD)? Is a locality working with a new ISP to facilitate entry? Planning processes that fail to include ISPs risk developing recommendations that could result in inefficient overbuilding or related interventions that might be unnecessary and costly. As such, working closely with ISPs from the start can help to ensure that all local stakeholders, including policymakers, are apprised of those entities' plans for investing in, expanding, and upgrading their networks and offerings.
- **Gather and Analyze as Much Data as Possible.** There are numerous ways in which state and local policymakers can gather ample, meaningful data regarding broadband availability and adoption. Policymakers and other stakeholders should avail themselves of these and all other relevant data to inform planning processes. Such data-driven planning will allow for greater precision in identifying where connectivity challenges exist and developing approaches to address those issues.
- **Engage Independent, Non-Vested Experts Whenever Possible.** Robust data-driven broadband planning involves a host of complex undertakings. These include gathering and analyzing significant amounts of data; using those data points to create detailed maps; and parsing data to understand the unique nuances of broadband adoption decisions in a given market. Accordingly, states and localities that lack the expertise to do these analyses should seek to engage outside experts whenever possible. These experts should be thoroughly vetted to ensure that they are truly independent, objective, not vested in any specific outcome, and capable of delivering high-quality work-product.
- **Revisit and Update Broadband Plans as Appropriate.** Effective broadband planning is not a one-time initiative. Rather, broadband planning should be an ongoing project for a state or locality. This ensures that plans and recommended interventions change in response to new developments. Ongoing planning also creates a vehicle for the consistent collection and analysis of useful data, which should be consulted when developing updated policy recommendations.