

OBAMA'S BROADBAND PLAN
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This January, President Barack Obama announced a federal government initiative to expand broadband infrastructure. Given the widespread use of technology in today's society, the President believes that broadband access is an essential piece of infrastructure that needs improvement. [1]. The Broadband Opportunity Council Report and Recommendations states:

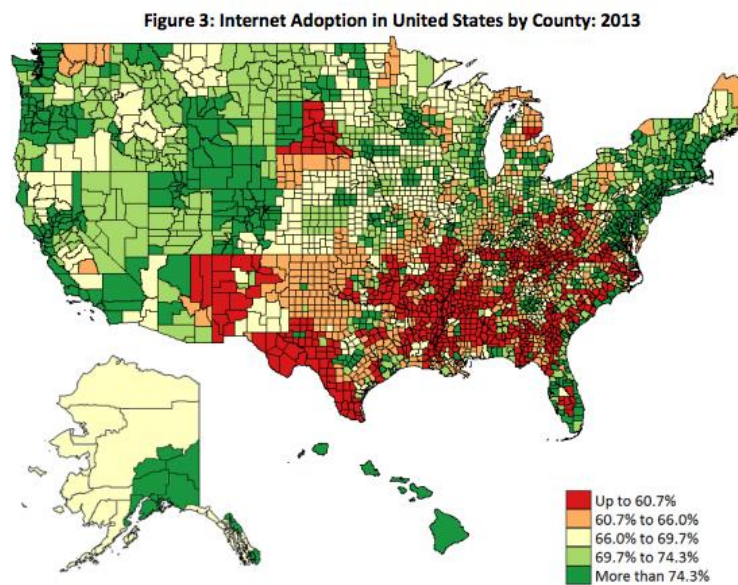
“Access to high-speed broadband is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity for American families, businesses, and consumers. Affordable, reliable access to high-speed broadband is critical to U.S. economic growth and competitiveness. High-speed broadband enables Americans to use the Internet in new ways, expands access to health services and education, increases the productivity of businesses, and drives innovation throughout the digital ecosystem.”

[2]. Given his commitment to increasing America's broadband access, the Commander-in-Chief signed a Presidential Memorandum titled “Expanding Broadband Deployment and Adoption by Addressing Regulatory Barriers and Encouraging Investment and Training, ” which established the Broadband Opportunity Council. [3]. Secretaries Penny Pritzker (Department of Commerce) and Tom Vilsack (Department of Agriculture) chaired the Council, which also included representatives from numerous other federal agencies. ¹

¹ Other governmental agencies included the Department of Defense, Department of State, Department of the Interior, Department of Labor, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Justice, Department of Transportation, Department of the Treasury, Department of Energy, Department of Education, Department of Veterans Affairs, Environmental Protection Agency, General Services Administration, Small Business Administration, Institute of Museum and Library Services, National Science Foundation, Council on Environmental Quality, Office of Science and Technology Policy, Office of Management and Budget, Council of Economic Advisers, Domestic Policy Council, National Economic Council, National Security Council staff.

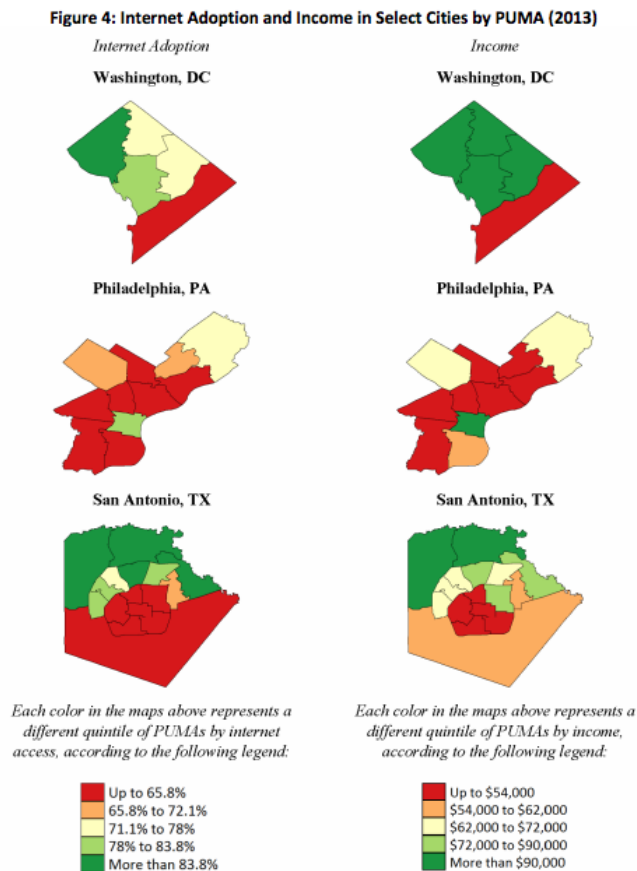
Tasked with researching a top priority of the Obama administration, the Council studied high-speed broadband access in America and subsequently prepared recommendations for deployment during Obama’s final days in office. The West Wing received the Broadband Opportunity Council’s findings on August 20, 2015 and published the report a month later. Before delving into the President’s agenda to modernize this portion of America’s infrastructure, however, one must understand the digital problem besetting America.

This July, the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), an administrative office within the Executive Office of the President, published a report that highlighted the “digital divide.” Most notably, the report found that a large number of Americans do not use a computer and “substantial disparities in both Internet use and quality of access.” [4]. By exploring Figure 3 of the Council of Economic Adviser’s report, “Mapping the Digital Divide,” it becomes clear that rural areas lag behind more densely populated, urban regions.



However, the issue is not simply geographic. Rather, the crux of the digital divide lays in socioeconomic factors.

The Council of Economic Advisers found a direct correlation between Internet adoption and income in numerous cities, as seen in Figure 4.



Concluding that there is a “substantial within-city variation in Internet adoption” that is “strongly correlated with household income,” the CEA report suggests that socioeconomic factors predict the digital divide more accurately than population density. [5]. Thus, this initiative fits squarely with President Obama’s general policy goals to increase investment and aiding the less fortunate, while also modernizing the country.

The report focuses on several wide-ranging, social benefits that Internet access provide, such as productivity and quality of life, which are compromised by the digital divide. Holding the divide is “likely both a cause and a consequence of other demographic disparities,” the CEA report laid the foundation for the Obama Administration’s initiative. In closing, the report points to the partisan rationale underlying Obama’s agenda:

Policies that aim to close the divide are pursued in recognition of the fact that the opportunities afforded by Internet access should be accessible to every American, much like other universally available utilities such as water and electricity. Expanding broadband access is an important part of a larger middle class economic policy agenda, both to support economic growth and to extend access to opportunity to more Americans.

After the CEA published its report, the Oval Office unveiled its initiative, a plan whose roots trace back to when Mr. Obama took office in 2009.

Since the Democrat entered the Oval Office, “investments from the Federal government have helped deploy or upgrade more than 110,000 miles of network infrastructure, and more than 45 million additional Americans have adopted broadband Internet”. [6]. Partially a consequence of private investment, but also stemming from a \$7.5 billion federal investment from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2009), broadband infrastructure has seen great strides throughout Obama’s tenure. [7]. The administration’s devotion to broadband is also evidenced through its program, “ConnectED” a social program that aims to connect the vast majority of American students to high speed broadband by 2018, as well as “ConnectHome” a demonstration project to equip over a quarter million low-income households with high speed broadband access. [8]. Despite these strides, after examining the Broadband Opportunity Council’s recommendations, it becomes clear that President Obama’s ambition to increase broadband investment and development still persists.

The Council made four predictable, vague recommendations to adapt America's cyber infrastructure to today's needs:

(1) Modernize federal programs to expand program support for broadband investments; (2) empower communities with tools and resources to attract broadband investment and promote meaningful use; (3) promote increased broadband deployment and competition through expanded access to federal assets; and (4) improve data collection, analysis and research on broadband. [9]

In order to achieve these goals, the report calls for state and local governments to collaborate with private corporations, meaningful and productive use of technology, and promotion of competition through 'dig once' policies. These policies "promotes competition, reduces costs for providers and decreases road-related costs from repeated excavation" by partnering with Tribal, State, and local governments to streamline construction. The themes of investment, efficiency, and education run throughout the report, as the Council hopes the program will aid businesses growth, while simultaneously empowering communities in the public health and education sectors. [10].

By advocating for minorities and the destitute, these recommendations align with Obama's progressive platform. Despite this partisan leaning, which has become synonymous with divisiveness in Congress of late, there is a chance that this program will be met with bipartisan support. Since Internet access is such an important utility for all citizens and businesses in today's age, and this program aids a diverse constituency, it is hard to imagine that it will be blocked in Congress. However, this may occur since this program requires government funding. Further, it has been difficult to pass infrastructure investment in the past, though this sector may be exceptional, since broadband access directly coincides with modernity, economic growth, and social benefits.

The Council's recommendations are self-evident; of course American infrastructure should adapt to developments in modernity, and no reasonable person in 2015 would deny that broadband access is a prerequisite to social mobility. However, equipping poverty-stricken or rustic areas, while good in theory, may not lead to tangible benefits, as broadband access is futile without the expensive tools needed to utilize it. These recommendations will certainly aid telecommunication companies through investments, though it is hard to imagine that residents of these underserved areas possess enough disposable income to purchase tablets, laptops, or desktop computers. Nonetheless, the Obama Administration should be commended for this ambitious effort, for it at least lays a piece of foundation necessary for social mobility among the destitute, forgotten areas, the demographics generally overlooked in American politics.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Adam Sneed, *White House to unveil broadband report*, POLITICO (Sept. 21, 2015 10:00 AM), <http://www.politico.com/tipsheets/morning-tech/2015/09/2015-09-21-pro-morning-tech-210309>
- [2] Broadband Opportunity Council, *Broadband Opportunity Council Report and Recommendations*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Aug. 20, 2015), at *3.
https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/broadband_opportunity_council_report_final.pdf
- [3] The White House Office of the Press Secretary, *Presidential Memorandum – Expanding Broadband Development and Adoption by Addressing Regulatory Barriers and Encouraging Investment and Training*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Mar. 23, 2015), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/23/presidential-memorandum-expanding-broadband-deployment-and-adoption-addr>.
- [4] Council of Economic Advisers Issue Brief, *Mapping The Digital Divide*, THE WHITE HOUSE (July 2015), https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/wh_digital_divide_issue_brief.pdf
- [5] *See id.*
- [6] Jeffrey Zients, *Delivering on Broadband Opportunity*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Sept. 21, 2015) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/09/21/new-steps-deliver-high-speed-broadband-across-united-states>
- [7] Broadband Opportunity Council, *Broadband Opportunity Council Report and Recommendations*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Aug. 20, 2015), at *4.
https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/broadband_opportunity_council_report_final.pdf
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- [8] The White House Office of the Press Secretary, *FACT SHEET: ConnectHome: Coming Together to Ensure Digital Opportunity for All Americans*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Jul. 15, 2015), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/15/fact-sheet-connecthome-coming-together-ensure-digital-opportunity-all>
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