NEXT CENTURY CITIES SENDS OPEN LETTER TO CONGRESSIONAL LEADERSHIP URGING INVESTMENT IN DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Washington, D.C. (June 11, 2020) – This morning Next Century Cities sent a letter to leaders of the United States House of Representatives and the United States Senate on behalf of our 200+ member municipalities.

Elected and appointed officials representing cities, towns, and counties nationwide shared hardships and ongoing concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered in communities with weak or nonexistent broadband infrastructure. They also shared solutions created to address connectivity shortfalls.

Tom Mullen, Chief Data Officer of **Riverside County, California**, shared the profound effect that COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders had on a significant portion of the local workforce:

> "We transitioned more than 7,000 employees, approximately one third of our total workforce, to remote workers in a matter of weeks...Employee home broadband connections are vital for the continued operations in our county and community."

Zach Friend, Supervisor in **Santa Cruz County, California**, spoke candidly about the power of Congressional leadership to change the course of communities heavily impacted by COVID-19:

> "Many rural and lower income areas, including in my county, were left to shelter in place without the ability to do schoolwork, access medical care or even submit for benefits. One Congressional vote could wipe away the digital divide and place all of our communities on equal footing."

The sentiments shared by **Dr. dt ogilvie**, Senior Advisor to Lovely Warren, Mayor of **Rochester, New York**, echo local officials nationwide, "Fast, affordable internet connectivity should be considered as important as electricity, gas, or water. In fact, internet access should be a utility."

As indicated by the stories from municipalities from coast to coast, broadband infrastructure is critical to overall wellbeing and advancement. **Mayor Deborah Frank Feinen** in **Champaign, Illinois**, emphasized the danger of ignoring the widening digital divide, "Now more than ever we cannot leave a segment of our population behind. Please help us to eliminate the online access gap now by investing in our nation's digital infrastructure now."

Like many cities, **Anacortes, Washington**, addressed the community's Internet needs by installing Drive-In WiFi hotspot locations. However, the City's Director of Administrative

Services, **Emily Schuh** recognizes that the solution is not sustainable, "To continue our effort to expand broadband access to all City of Anacortes businesses and residents, it is imperative for us to have funding mechanisms available to continue with the design and construction of the broadband infrastructure for our island community."

The highlighted workarounds do not offer needed long-term solutions for communities to thrive in a digital society. Addressing the existing divide requires both public and private solutions. By making broadband access and adoption a national priority, Federal lawmakers have the potential to effect widespread lasting change for generations to come. As **Francella Ochillo**, Executive Director, Next Century Cities stated:

> "America can live up to its ideals by centering the voices of those who have been silenced and sidelined, the poor and disenfranchised, the hard to reach and the invisible. That requires access to the 21st century public square online. Educational, economic, health, and other freedoms are all improved with connectivity. It has become increasingly clear that equality in those pursuits and the digital divide cannot coexist."

Next Century Cities is committed to using our platform to elevate the voices of local officials and residents at every level of government. We hope that sharing these stories with elected officials will serve as the catalyst for enacting laws that expand and strengthen broadband networks for every resident of every community.

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