Next Century Cities

Desert, mountains, and sparsely populated areas pose unique challenges to broadband deployment in Southwest regions of the state.

The FCC found that 94.8% of 7.2 million residents statewide had access to a fixed broadband connection at minimum 25/3 Mbps speeds. In rural Arizona, the agency evaluated 922,000 people and found that just 613,000 (66.5%) of them had access to a fixed broadband at minimum speeds. To the contrary, in urban areas, it found that 6.2 million of 6.3 million people surveyed (98.9%) had fixed broadband access.

In Next Century Cities member municipality, Coconino County, the Commission evaluated approximately 92,000 residents. Of these, the Commission found that 79.5% of the population had access to a fixed connection at minimum broadband speeds.

Microsoft estimates that around 3.2 million Arizona residents, almost half of its population, did not use the Internet at broadband speeds. Private entities are helping to improve broadband mapping in Arizona. According to BroadbandNow, 73.8% of the state is connected with terrestrial broadband coverage, but only 8.7% of the state offered access to a wired plan priced below $60 per month.

As Senator Kyrsten Sinema has stated:

"High-speed Internet allows rural and tribal communities throughout Arizona increased access to health care, education and jobs. Simplifying the broadband application process helps Arizonans apply for critical broadband resources, ensuring all Arizona communities have the connectivity they need."

Senator Sinema has worked to expand rural broadband access by introducing the ACCESS Rural America Act which is intended to increase the accuracy of the Commission's broadband maps by refining the process by which data is collected.

Broadband access is an economic development and public safety issue, according to Ben Blink, the transportation and technology innovation policy advisor to Arizona's Governor, Doug Ducey. He has highlighted unique broadband expansion challenges in Southwest regions of the state, areas with large expanses of desert, mountains and a lot of areas with sparse populations.

According to school superintendents, *"equitable access to technology (both devices and technology) is already a major challenge."* The COVID-19 pandemic further *"shed light on a major disparity that has long existed in Arizona."*

Arizona Mirror captured stories from Navajo reservation residents:

Chenoa's family has satellite Internet at home, but it's too slow to download big files or stream videos simultaneously. "Sometimes our Internet will go down," her father said, "and they're stuck without going to school for a day or so." So they spend about 20 hours a week parked by the school bus for a better connection.

The Arizona Farm Bureau reflects concerns expressed by farmers and ranchers nationwide. They depend on broadband, just as they do highways

and railways to ship food and fiber across the country. Residents in rural areas continue to struggle with poor broadband connectivity and lack of technological advancement. When describing the impact that COVID-19 has had on connectivity in rural areas, Yuma County Farm Bureau President David Sharp stated:

> We knew that our connection to the broadband, Internet as well as our cell service, was a bit challenging, but we got along well enough until COVID-19. When our country began the lock-down we needed to rely on our broadband and cell service even more. But with the added demands on these services by all that use them it became even slower, and more difficult.

The State of Arizona provides a basic community planning map that does not require GIS skills to navigate. It is granular enough for users to conduct spatial searches based on zip code.

Additional Resources:
- New WiFi map, free tech support to help Arizona students access Internet
- New interactive map helps Arizonans access the Internet statewide
- New law to increase Internet access for rural and tribal communities
- How schools ensure students' tech, Wi-Fi access to support online learning
- Next Century Cities Case Study: Mesa, Arizona