

EDITORIAL

ISLAND VOICES

Column: Broadband woes go beyond connectivity

By Daniel C. Smith

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I write to mahalo the Star-Advertiser and reporter Victoria Budiono for the June 10 story on the broadband office move from the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism to the Department of Accounting and General Services and clean-up of some policy committees (“[New state law creates broadband office to close connectivity gap](#)”). I also write to sound an alarm about impounding of yet more congressional appropriations and related broadband issues in Hawaii.

Three state agencies have recent, significant federal money to expand broadband internet. (There are others, too, such as the Department of Education.) The first is the former Hawaii Broadband & Digital Equity Office (HBDEO), now just Broadband Office (BO), that the article was about, and which has \$6.5 million for digital literacy programs.

The second, with much more money, is the University of Hawaii Broadband Office (UHBO) that has about \$265 million in federal money for physical infrastructure connections including the federal Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program with \$149.5 million. The state has also appropriated \$46 million in matching funds providing options on ownership, increasing affordability and/or undergrounding.

The third agency is the **Department of Hawaiian Home Lands**, which has about \$90 million to connect homelands and support effective use of the internet by residents. That would include “equity” or literacy programs for education, telehealth, workforce development and civic engagement.

Unfortunately, the word “equity” angers the Trump administration, so digital equity money appropriated by Congress for the BO has been frozen.

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The state library system has an effective digital navigator program that it seeks to expand from seven to all 51 libraries. However, the request for proposals cites \$4.7 million controlled by UH as part of the BEAD program. That would be recently frozen “non-deployment” funds not needed to get all households online and is “equity” money. Community nonprofits that applied for digital equity competitive grants through BEAD are also on hold. Perhaps BEAD is now BAD!

BEAD has been further weakened by a June 6 federal directive requiring state agencies like UH to rebid infrastructure proposals to connect unserved and underserved locations to focus on lowest cost rather than prioritizing fiber. Wireless and satellite — think Elon Musk’s Starlink — may be cheaper initially, but they have higher maintenance costs and limited expansion capacity. The underground conduit from Wailuku to Lahaina, installed by Sandwich Isles Communication but now owned by Hawaiian Telcom, was expensive but allowed rapid reconnection after the August 2023 West Maui fire. New technology for horizontal directional drilling (HDD) can help us affordably dangle less fiber on poles to face hurricanes.

We don’t know much about the proposals to UH — they were just about to be awarded — because of procurement/bidding confidentiality and competition regulations. Each bidder could propose its own technology and cost solution. We do know that there are about 11,000 unserved or underserved (slow, unreliable) locations state-wide. While UH is certainly competent, public input to the process could facilitate better solutions.

Also, DHHL has not said much publicly about its solutions. The DHHL case is interesting because as it connects scattered homelands areas, it can benefit by serving non-Hawaiian households along the way. DHHL also has the option to provide choices of internet service providers over one fiber to the house either by its own company or by a contractor.

Finally, I suggest that we rally and support Hawaii becoming the first state to reach 100% of the households wanting to be online, actually being online and effectively — and equitably — using the internet.

Hawaiian Telcom has said it will have the state “fully fiber-enabled by 2026” but we don’t know exactly what that means. Does the fiber run down the street by

my house? At the federal level, “served” means connected or could get connected with high-speed internet within 10 business days of the request. I wish Hawaiian Telcom success!

Don't need BEAD money? On the contrary, we will especially need the digital equity and digital navigator programs for effective use of broadband.

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1 COMMENTS

