



Insight

What's in the Infrastructure Plan for Broadband

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The president's [infrastructure plan](#) includes two sections that could support expanding broadband: the grant programs and permitting reform. To ensure Americans have adequate access to broadband, Congress should consider combining the president's proposals with reforms suggested by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee. These include consistent federal permitting fees, a limit on how long federal agencies have to review permitting requests, and a designated federal contact for those seeking to build on federal land.

Grant programs are central to the president's infrastructure plan and are intended to work in concert with state and local governments since local authorities know better what their constituents need. Broadband might benefit through two of these programs but the total amount of funding allocated will depend on the priorities and decisions of the states.

The Rural Infrastructure Program intends to distribute \$50 billion for capital investments in rural infrastructure. States would receive block grants for infrastructure projects in areas with populations of less than 50,000 people. Given this definition, money would likely flow to [micropolitan regions](#), which the Office of Management and Budget defines as an urban core and adjacent area with at least 10,000 people but less than 50,000. In total, there are 536 such regions ranging from populations of 12,000 to 200,000. While broadband is included among the eligible classes of investment, there is no set aside for broadband specifically, leaving it to the states to decide how much, if any, to spend on expansion.

The Rural Infrastructure Program would be split into two parts: 80 percent of the funds would be provided to states via a formula based on rural lane miles and rural population, and the other 20 percent of the funds would be retained for rural performance grants. These performance grants would require states to "demonstrate how [their] intended rural projects align with the evaluation criteria in the infrastructure incentives program, including State, local and private sector investment in eligible projects." Considering the infrastructure plan's emphasis on employment and growth, states might be reluctant to apply for a performance grant for broadband. Government efforts to make broadband more plentiful often have only lackluster economic effects, [as AAF has detailed](#). The Obama administration argued that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (also known as the "stimulus") would spur growth by expanding broadband, yet research has found that the resulting investments produced little change in economic and quality of life measurements.

The president's Transformative Projects Program is the other proposal that could boost funding for broadband infrastructure. Housed under the Department of Commerce, this program would allocate \$20 billion to ambitious project ideas with "significantly more risk than standard infrastructure projects, but [that] offer a much larger reward profile." Again, there is no specific money set aside for broadband, so state leaders would have to decide where funds would be distributed.

The president's infrastructure plan also includes provisions aimed at streamlining the review processes of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Historic Preservation Act (HPA). The next generation of

wireless tech will expand using “[small cells](#)”—small radio access nodes that can increase the density of cell phone signal coverage when used in large numbers—yet the HPA review process makes no distinction in size, so a football-size cell requires the same full review as a much larger tower. The plan suggests amending the law to expedite small cells and Wi-Fi attachments.

There are a number of relatively smaller items not included in the infrastructure plan that could accelerate broadband deployment, each of which comes from the FCC Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee’s [recent recommendations](#).

Federal agencies often have varying and unpredictable fees and rates for companies that want to gain access to federal lands. If federal agencies were required to publish a public fee schedule that clearly outlined the costs associated with building on federal lands, then broadband providers could better estimate the costs of a potential project. Moreover, the publication of an agency fee schedule would dramatically reduce the negotiating over prices that often occurs, saving both sides time. Much of this is included in [the Communications Facilities Deployment on Federal Property Act of 2018](#).

Second and more important, Congress could press the issue of a broadband permit shot clock. Agencies could be required to process and respond to applications within a set time—no more than 60 working days. If this doesn’t happen, then applications would be given approval automatically within 180 days of the initial submission. The FCC has implemented a similar rule for municipalities’ review of wireless infrastructure. It stands to reason that federal agencies could sensibly be held to the same standard.

Other reforms could help as well. Each government property could have a designated contact for applicants who can be found easily on the agency website. Also, since local field offices say that staff constraints lead to application delays, perhaps fee revenues should be shifted more heavily toward those offices.

As for funding, the infrastructure plan focuses on the Department of Commerce and Department of Transportation and leaves out the FCC. [Congressional leadership](#), however, has signaled that they want the FCC to take the helm. Reforms that put the Universal Service Fund (USF), the FCC’s flagship communications support program, on firm support are long overdue. If Congress wants to support broadband, the program needs to be sustainable for the long term.

With the release of the president’s infrastructure plan, Congress can begin to move on key infrastructure legislation. Congress should consider packaging the president’s proposals with reforms suggested by the FCC to ensure better access to broadband Internet.