

The Pueblo Chieftain

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Yes on 2A — the importance of expanding internet broadband services in Pueblo

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On Tuesday, Nov. 8, the voters of Pueblo have a great opportunity to allow our city to work with internet providers, local educators, and others, to expand internet broadband services throughout the city. The beginning of this critically important expansion can be accomplished simply by voting “YES on 2A”— the local city ordinance on the ballot allowing for the city of Pueblo to legally engage in this expansion. The many reasons to support “YES on 2A” follow.

In order to compete more effectively in today’s economy, communities nationwide have become increasingly dependent on reliable internet access — especially high-capacity (“broadband”) internet access — for things like: robust business development and operations, meaningful educational access at all levels, and citizen participation in various aspects of life.

The availability of dynamic and dependable broadband services has become a modern necessity that often enhances the desirability of a community. Powerful broadband access provides connectivity for: online education and distance learning opportunities; online banking, bill paying, and shopping services; employees that can work from home; and patients who can engage in telemedicine with their doctors.

In short, broadband has become so critical, especially for businesses, that many regard it as basic infrastructure, and a modern utility need, for all citizens — on par with roads, water systems, and energy grids.

Unfortunately, it is painfully obvious that many areas of Pueblo have inadequate internet connectivity. The reasons vary, but the reality is that many providers are just economically unable, or simply unwilling, to connect all of Pueblo adequately, leaving us at an economic disadvantage when compared to many other cities and towns in Colorado, let alone in the entire country.

In fact, in a recent study, out of all cities, towns, villages, etc., throughout the entire nation, Pueblo was found to be the 82nd *WORST* community in America for access to wireline

broadband services [See the NDIA (“National Digital Inclusion Alliance”) article on “Worst Connected Cities 2019,” digitalinclusion.org/worst-connected-cities-2019/].

Also, the recent pandemic further demonstrated the critical importance of high-speed internet to keep society running. The unfair specter of some of our children having to get internet access by going to a McDonald’s or library parking lot to access their classes (or not being able to access classes at all due to a complete lack of internet access) was deplorable.

We are better than that, Pueblo. Therefore, we need to do something about it. We need to vote “YES on 2A” in order to allow the city to expand broadband services in Pueblo.

Mayor Gradisar, and all of the forward-thinking members on the Pueblo City Council, understand the very acute need here. By putting Proposition 2A on the ballot, they want the city to be able to expand broadband in Pueblo. This kind of allowance by cities is certainly not unique, nor is it unprecedented. In the last few years, a growing number of local governments have started looking at investing public dollars in broadband access improvements in order to attract internet providers and enhance economic development (see map below).



Colorado Communities Restoring Local Authority map *Courtesy Image*

But, *in Colorado*, one of the biggest impediments in doing so is a state law passed in 2005, which has been referred to as “Senate Bill (SB) 152” (codified in article 27 of title 29, C.R.S.).

“SB 152” prohibits most uses of municipal or county money for infrastructure to improve local broadband service, without first going to a vote of the people. In the past few years, well over 100 municipalities and counties in Colorado have placed measures on the ballot to override the prohibitions of SB 152.

These measures have passed handily in virtually every jurisdiction in Colorado — with the support of citizens who are frustrated and want timely action on broadband service expansion in their communities. We should follow suit in Pueblo by getting into the 21st Century and voting YES on 2A; and thereby allow Pueblo to “opt out” of the overly restrictive and unnecessary statutory prohibitions of SB 152.

It is important to understand that opting out of SB 152 by voting “YES on 2A” would NOT cost the city, nor any local taxpayers, any money or city funds whatsoever. Instead, a YES vote on 2A simply removes the existing SB 152 prohibition on Pueblo to use public funds, in the future, should the city ever decide to provide more broadband services in Pueblo and allow the city to explore and develop local plans for our community. It therefore bears repeating, if in the future, Pueblo ever decides to invest public funds into broadband expansion, the city, of course, would still need to follow its own fiscal spending guidelines and restraints for doing so.

But, a “YES on 2A” vote on Nov. 8, requires no expenditures at all from the city of Pueblo, nor from Pueblo taxpayers. Rather, a successful “YES on 2A” ballot vote merely would clear the way for the city to engage in broadband investing and strategic partnering with others in the future, if and when the city should ever decide to do so.

So why is “YES on 2A” so very important? To have a strong economy, Pueblo must have access to quality internet broadband service. The availability of broadband already affects where businesses locate, where travelers visit, and where people choose to live. The economic and social importance of access to fast, high-quality internet broadband services will only increase over time. Having access to first-rate broadband services in Pueblo would help keep our schools, businesses, and homes competitive in our region and nationally.

Pueblo simply must have access to broadband to be economically competitive; but SB 152 took away our right to directly or indirectly provide broadband. Voting “YES on 2A” is the only way for Pueblo to take back the right that SB 152 took away from us. We can either choose to ignore the future, or, we can choose to boldly embrace it. Voting “YES on 2A,” which would allow our city to opt out of SB 152, is the critical first step for Pueblo to move forward.

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