



City of Baltimore

# Digital Equity FRAMEWORK

**Mayor Brandon M. Scott • Mayor's Office of Broadband and Digital Equity**

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# Dear Baltimore,

**The COVID-19 pandemic showed us that internet access has become fundamental to our daily lives.** Ensuring digital equity is not a choice, but an imperative. We will not wait. Baltimore will take an active role - not just to bridge the digital divide, but to close the digital divide, once and for all.

From our students to our older adults, Baltimoreans struggled to learn virtually, work from home, and access needed telemedicine on unreliable, slow connections and limited access to broadband. We must treat internet access as basic public infrastructure, just like roads, water, or electricity.

As your Mayor, I look forward to working in close partnership with the Mayor's Office of Broadband and Digital Equity, stakeholders outside of City Hall, and our residents to build from and activate the framework outlined in the pages that follow - with a focus on our residents and communities that have historically lacked access.

This is just the beginning.

In service,

*Brandon M. Scott*

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# Baltimore's Digital Equity Vision

The City of Baltimore will permanently close its digital divide by 2030. We will eliminate the root cause of broadband inequality by building ubiquitous, open-access fiber infrastructure that will enable transformational opportunities for all residents.

**The city's vision will sharpen with discussion.** Baltimore's plan will evolve and grow stronger with citywide participation and partnerships. We invite feedback from the public, the private sector, institutions, non-profits, and all other stakeholders in Baltimore.

# The city needs to take transformational action on the digital divide.

**Broadband access has risen to the level of critical public infrastructure.** It took a global pandemic to undeniably establish in the public mind that robust, affordable broadband service is an essential tool for our daily lives—as necessary as reliable electricity and clean water. Digital equity—including affordable broadband service, access to devices, and the digital skills necessary to use the internet—is critical to enabling all Baltimoreans to participate in the modern economy and civic life.

**Systemic issues prevent many Baltimoreans from meaningfully connecting to the internet.** In Baltimore as in most major American cities, broadband market forces are not functioning to the benefit of residents. Rather, market forces are functioning as might be expected in a near-monopoly environment—meaning the private sector is delivering services at levels and prices the market will bear, given a framework of limited competition and high costs of market entry.

**The private sector does not invest in efforts with low returns, whether in terms of broadband or any other sector.** As has been the case for many decades, residents of the city's poorer neighborhoods live with the outcomes of systemic underinvestment in critical infrastructure in their communities. Subsidies for service are proof positive that the digital divide exists, but they are not a long-term solution. And the lack of competition in the broadband market means there is little likelihood that the market dynamics will change—absent the construction of new infrastructure.

**A systemic problem requires a systemic solution.** Over the long run, city-owned, future-proof infrastructure can help close the city's digital divide. Beginning with our most underserved neighborhoods, the city will build an open-access fiber-to-the-premises network that will ultimately enable direct connections to every home, business, and institution in Baltimore. The network will provide free, high-quality access for residents of low-income housing, and free public Wi-Fi in the city's underserved neighborhoods and eventually throughout Baltimore.

**Investing in that infrastructure will also create a platform for programs and partnerships that create innovation and opportunity for all residents.** Lack of digital equity impacts each member of our community directly—but it also limits the entire community's ability to innovate and thrive. Digital equality will benefit the city as a whole. The city will use the infrastructure investment and deployment to catalyze minority business participation and to develop a talent pipeline—bolstering workforce development in high-demand, skilled vocations. And an evergreen digital equity fund will enable the city to co-invest with philanthropies and community organizations for even greater impact.

**Baltimore's  
digital equity  
framework is  
driven by core  
principles.**

# Broadband access is a public good.

A municipal fiber-to-the-premise network is now critical public infrastructure.

# Digital equity is table stakes in a modern civil society.

Enabling full participation in the digital economy is critical for every Baltimorean's future and is fundamental to ensuring social and racial justice.

# Community engagement is key to enabling opportunities.

Partnerships and participation are critical to closing the digital divide.

# Broadband access is a public good.

Lack of access to affordable, high-quality broadband limits Baltimoreans' educational, economic, social, and civic opportunities. Public investment in open access fiber infrastructure will help address inequality inherent in the broadband market—which does not currently function to the benefit of residents.

**Competition is an outcome, not a goal.** Private companies act on profit motives—and there is little monetary incentive to serve low-income customers. The high cost of building and upgrading broadband infrastructure is a further disincentive for incumbent providers and potential competitive entrants alike. As a result, Baltimore's broadband market is one of scarcity.

The same dynamic has played out in other major American cities. Had policy-makers understood decades ago how important broadband would become to their residents and their economic futures, those cities would have invested in digital infrastructure—just as they have built new roads and expanded sewer systems to serve new business parks and residential developments.

**Stopgap solutions are not sufficient.** World-class cities require world-class broadband infrastructure. Short-term solutions, such as subsidies, are well-intentioned efforts to address society's most pressing needs, but Baltimoreans deserve permanent and sustainable solutions. The city recognizes that there exist widespread benefits to the city's efficiency, vitality, and prosperity when all residents are connected—so investing in those who are not connected will pay future dividends in shared prosperity and a rising standard of living for all.

**Public ownership of future-proof infrastructure will provide long-term capability to meet the needs of all Baltimoreans, regardless of income level.** Only by constructing and owning the core infrastructure—like the public roads that touch every corner of the city—can the city ensure its investment will benefit all Baltimoreans equally. Committing to this investment will give the city and its residents long-term security, flexibility, and scalability, even as network needs evolve and expand in the future.

# Digital equity is table stakes in a modern civil society.

**Enabling full participation in the modern, digital economy is critical for every Baltimorean's future and is fundamental to ensuring social and racial justice.** Therefore, Baltimore's digital equity plan must start with infrastructure that will ensure equitable access.

The city's overarching goal is to replace digital scarcity with abundance and make opportunity accessible to all. To achieve that goal, the city will build core public infrastructure that will address the digital divide in the long-term—and will actively seek out and engage in productive partnerships, public and private, for the benefit of the city and all its residents.

## All Baltimoreans will have access everywhere.

The city envisions broadband as ubiquitous as electricity, wherever a resident needs it—whether that is at home, at work, or walking in their neighborhood. A broadband infrastructure

that reaches every resident, without exception, will create a truly interconnected network that affords access to everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status. Achieving this goal is beneficial to all; just as individual connectivity is good for the individual, the entire city can benefit by creating opportunities for every resident.

The solution will be investment in and expansion of the city's existing infrastructure—purposefully building on the current foundation with a clear vision for future-proof digital infrastructure that reaches every neighborhood, starting with the most underserved communities.

## All Baltimoreans will have access to future-proof broadband connectivity.

Open access fiber optics are recognized worldwide as the gold standard in broadband infrastructure. The city's investment in fiber infrastructure will enable all Baltimore residents and institutions to access affordable, high-quality services that meet both current and future needs.

## All Baltimoreans will benefit from broadband market competition.

Constructing an open-access network will enable competition for last-mile service to end users throughout the city. Enabling competition will lead to better pricing for all customers, as well as the emergence of innovative new services and capabilities over time. These will be positive outcomes for individual Baltimoreans, but also for the city as a whole.

# Community engagement is key to enabling opportunities.

**The city's digital equity effort will encompass wide-ranging programs and partnerships with public and private entities.**

The city recognizes that constructing new open-access fiber infrastructure will be the most visible step in achieving its vision—but it will only be the first step. Baltimore will achieve digital equity by 2030 through programs and partnerships that capitalize on the availability of the publicly-owned fiber network—and that address other essential elements of the digital divide.

Developing successful partnerships within the community and the private sector will be critical to maximizing the benefits of the infrastructure. The city will take the lead on ensuring residents can access city resources, just as it anticipates working closely with Baltimore City Public Schools and Enoch Pratt Free Library to support and expand their missions on behalf of all Baltimoreans. The city also commits to enabling partnerships—including with public and nonprofit entities, internet service providers, and others—to develop programs that advance the collective mission.

# All Baltimoreans will have access to digital skills training.

New broadband adopters (and those who want to make better use of broadband) need to know how to use computing devices and navigate the internet. Some new users will teach themselves, but for many others, training will be key to their success. The city commits to expanding existing digital skills training efforts, in partnership with community groups, to ensure training is available when and where it's needed.

Of particular emphasis will be the city's efforts to build robust digital supports into the point of service for all constituent-facing operations. As more city services move online, it is our responsibility to ensure that our residents are not inadvertently left behind.

# All Baltimoreans will be able to acquire a modern computing device.

Device ownership is a recognized hurdle to broadband adoption, particularly in lower-income communities where smartphones—frequently with data caps and high service fees—are often the only way to get online. The city commits to ensuring that all surplus city computing devices are made available to Baltimoreans in need, to supporting established organizations that focus on refurbishing donated devices, and to partnerships that enable Baltimoreans to acquire tablets, laptops, or desktop computers. Community loaner programs could fill out the picture—creating another outlet for access to devices. Ready availability of a modern computing device is straightforward and inherently solvable.

# All Baltimoreans will be able to receive technical support.

On-call technical support—in multiple languages—will enable Baltimoreans who have internet access and devices to make the best possible use of those tools. Having a trusted resource when an internet connection fails or a device stops working is critical to keeping Baltimoreans connected over the long term. The city commits to supporting and collaborating with partners on a sustainable, community-based technical support model. Developing this capacity will be critical to the long-term success of our efforts.

# Baltimore's digital equity initiatives will create opportunities at every step.

The process of constructing new open access fiber infrastructure—and the programs and partnerships the infrastructure enables—are all, in themselves, opportunities to create transformational change for individual residents and for the city as a whole. The end goal is to enable all Baltimoreans to reach their full potential in the modern, digital economy.

## The city will use its capital investments to expand minority participation in procurement opportunities.

The city's fiber infrastructure will require significant capital investments and the participation of highly skilled vendors to plan, design, and deploy the network. As the city identifies its construction and technology partners, it will leverage these investments to help create digital-economy jobs for local businesses; both established and startups. In this way, much of these funds will stay in the city—and help facilitate wealth creation among Baltimore residents.

## The city will use the fiber infrastructure and related programs to create long-term training and technology career opportunities for Baltimoreans.

During construction and after the fiber infrastructure has been deployed, the city will use the network and related programs to enable new digital-economy jobs and training opportunities. In this way, technical support programs can be more than a one-way benefit to residents who need help using broadband. They can also provide a path to a career in the digital economy. The city will help create and support efforts designed to build local capacity in critical, in-demand skills.

The city will help Baltimoreans capitalize on the benefits that fiber and other elements of its digital equity initiatives create.

Ubiquitous fiber access, digital literacy, device ownership, and technical support are only the beginning of the city's digital equity plan. The city will place a priority on ensuring its residents can truly capitalize on those tools—with access to education, job training, and mentoring that will lead to higher-paying jobs, more successful digital entrepreneurship, and better futures for all Baltimoreans.

The city will make data-driven decisions to ensure the efficacy of all digital equity initiatives.

The city will develop a digital opportunity scorecard to continuously monitor the quality of services available over its infrastructure; the outcomes of its digital skills training and technical support programs; and the quantifiable impacts of digital equity to ensure it can make data-driven decisions about future programs and investments. Particular emphasis will be on developing community-driven, neighborhood-level data collection and analysis methodologies.

# The Path Forward

**Closing the digital divide in Baltimore by 2030 is an ambitious vision—but the alternative is unconscionable.** Although this dichotomy of technology haves and have-nots is a relatively recent phenomenon, it has been exacerbated by generations of disinvestment and societal neglect. Permanently solving the problem requires a bold approach and a commitment to stay the course over the long term.

As the nation emerges from a global pandemic, there are unprecedented resources flowing to state and local governments to aid in the recovery and invest in infrastructure. Those federal dollars will not be nearly enough to fully build out Baltimore's digital infrastructure, but they can make a down payment on our promises. Every Baltimorean deserves to be an equal participant in the opportunities that the digital economy presents.

Baltimore's Digital Equity Framework is the first step in a journey that will culminate a decade from now. Over the coming months we will develop more specific, targeted plans and implementation strategies—with a commitment to community engagement and an "all hands on deck" approach to bold, transformative action. Baltimore deserves nothing less.

We invite all stakeholders to join in and engage with your ideas and feedback alike:

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