

Memo

To: Mayor Jim Kinney, Office of the Mayor of Philadelphia

From: Lenny Collado, SPAA Student

Date: April 22, 2023

Re: Improve the disaster of underregulated broadband infrastructure

Digital redlining is not unlike “[R]edlining, a discriminatory practice where resources like housing loans are withheld from certain neighborhoods that institutions have deemed hazardous, generally because they are predominantly home to communities of color or low-income residents” (Quaintance, 2022). It is our legislative institutions who have a history of labeling areas and communities a “problem” or a danger that keeps those communities from obtaining the critical support they need to thrive. When one adds the consideration of broadband connectivity to the aforementioned term and its insidious nature, we see that “Digital redlining is [an] underinvestment by Internet companies in providing service to communities that are lower income — disproportionately communities of color — and it results in plans that have lower speeds,” and are unreasonably priced as compared to affluent neighbors (Quaintance, 2022). The cost of poor infrastructure is greater than infrastructure that has been made to be effective, costly to those affected and to the greater society, and continues driving a wedge between groups of people. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau Director Rohit Chopra says that “Redlining ... exists in new forms, including in the physical and digital worlds” (USDOJ, 2023).

Digital Equity in Philadelphia is being approached with ineffective policy causing a deficit in digital and broadband connectivity, an imbalance of prospects, and lack of essential services. Philadelphia, “[t]hough it’s 100% connected [to broadband Internet] according to [Federal Communications Commission] FCC data, American Community Survey (ACS) census data reveals a stark digital divide that falls largely along racial and socioeconomic lines, driven partly by service costs that are unaffordable for impoverished communities” (Popiel and Pickard 2022). There is a deepening gap between those connected and those who are not. The authors note that “Internet service providers’ discriminatory underinvestment in broadband infrastructure and services—referred to as ‘digital redlining’ for disproportionately affecting low-income communities of color—is drawing increased public scrutiny, including from policymakers” (Popiel and Pickard 2022). Mr. Kinney, you have constituents who agree that these companies choose “...based on profit, factoring in an area’s wealth as well as competition from other companies” (Quaintance, 2022). The main motivation is corporate gain, not communal health. In certain instances, they enhance “vital network maintenance in wealthier areas instead of extending basic infrastructure” in places where people struggle financially (Quaintance, 2022). There is proactive negligence, and more can be done to help. Many people are affected and unduly in areas of low income largely because there is little money to be made by companies

maintaining under unregulated profit incentives (i.e., protected by policy or lack thereof)—that would provide the infrastructure and the technology for broadband Internet connection.

Accordingly, legislators have had their way to put a stop to municipalities moving forward with Information and Technology (IT) projects and in this case, it was council person Frank Rizzo, Jr (your predecessor) (Abraham 2015) who discontinued efforts of this kind in Philadelphia. There was a push to “[t]he notion of ‘spending no tax dollars’...behind the Philadelphia wireless initiative,” and this lack of funding has had a detrimental impact on the community (Meinrath, Breitbart and Lakshmipathy, 2007). It keeps Philadelphians defeated, reduced, and stifled.

Proposals such as the Freedom Rings Partnership (also known as KEYSPOT) (Abraham 2015) shed light on what community collaboration could do to turn the devastation of dysconnectivity around. Initiatives such as Wireless Philadelphia agreed to take on bids that lacked public insight into IT projects in Philadelphia and what that would look like for the city (Abraham 2015). The initiative flopped. A lack of coordination with community agencies and utility companies exasperated the issue. Popiel and Pickard (2022) note that “[t]he Federal Communications Commission [(FCC)] recently initiated an inquiry, mandated by Congress, into eliminating such digital discrimination, defined as the failure to provide or maintain broadband service or the provision of inferior service, including in terms of affordability and speed” (Popiel and Pickard 2022). The societal principles and public values being compromised are community, education, health, and prosperity.

According to White and Myers (2023), “19% of the city’s households still don’t have a working computer.” They go on to mention that “...per Census Bureau statistics, over 98,000 homes go without internet access — the fourth highest percentage out of the country’s largest cities” (White and Myers, 2023). That is about 1 in 5 households. What this means in the long run is that folks go without learning about technologies and that there will be depletion in employment and health outcomes. Their capacities for navigating digitally will dwindle astronomically as time goes by while other communities develop and prosper.

With a lack of action on part of your office, you are implicitly labeling communities in Philadelphia problematic and justify the lack of concern for their need of this critical resource. When the nation prospers, these digitally divided areas do not. They stagnate and deplete consumed by disconnection, despair, and depression, isolated and kept out of mind by neighbors and legislators alike. It is your time to act, your time to help.

References

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