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NEWS

Wood introduces assembly bill to regulate broadband providers as a public utility

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Assemblymember Jim Wood (D-Healdsburg) has introduced AB 1714, legislation that will define and regulate broadband service providers as a public utility.

The California Constitution authorizes the Legislature to prescribe additional classes of private corporations or other persons as public utilities.

“Public utility” currently includes every common carrier, toll bridge corporation, pipeline corporation, gas corporation, electrical corporation, telephone corporation, telegraph corporation, water corporation, sewer system corporation and heat corporation, where the service is performed for, or the commodity is delivered to, the public.

“Broadband has become an essential service in the daily lives of 21st century consumers and we know Americans agree,” said Wood. “If we didn’t understand this before, we have certainly realized how much everyone depends on this service since 2020, when we entered the COVID-19 pandemic.”

A 2020 study from Consumer Reports found that 80 percent of consumers believe broadband service is as important as water and electricity. People rely on an internet connection to work in an office as well as remotely from home, attend virtual classrooms, apply for employment, receive medical care via telehealth services and handle financial transactions.

“There are endless examples of the need for this regulation, from its importance during and after emergencies and disasters to the need to address digital redlining that leaves rural and marginalized communities with no or slower and more expensive access than those in more dense and higher-income neighborhoods,” said Wood. “We know that those without internet access are significantly disadvantaged, just as not having access to electricity was decades ago.”

Regulation would allow enforcement of necessary functions such as network resiliency, reliable backup power, blackout prevention, network replacement and, in other ways, ensure preparedness for emergencies.

“Just as the infrastructure of water and electricity grew at the end of the 19th century and led to the creation of regulation to make sure that these technologies were available to everyone, the internet has grown to a point that demands it be regulated as a public utility subject to the same regulatory process to make sure that everyone has access to this technology, moving us closer to digital equity,” said Wood.

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