



Legislation Text

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The official copy considered by the City Council is the first reader copy.

Introductory*

**City of Baltimore
Council Bill R
(Resolution)**

Introduced by: Councilmember Cohen

A Resolution Entitled

A Council Resolution concerning
Calling on Comcast to Help Close the Digital Divide in Baltimore

For the purpose of calling on the Baltimore City Government to demand Comcast increase download and upload speeds under the Internet Essentials Program; extend the free Internet Essentials Program until 60 days beyond the complete re-opening of public schools; and to open all existing Xfinity hotspots free to the public for 60 days after the full restoration of public school.

Recitals

Whereas, Children are constitutionally guaranteed an education by Article VIII of the Maryland Constitution. Yet, unless children have access to adequate high-speed internet during the pandemic, they cannot receive an education. This includes summer courses that Baltimore students rely on in order to stay on track to graduate. Further, many children cannot get an education due to internet quality and access issues;

Whereas, Comcast of Baltimore City, LLC was granted a 10-year franchise agreement to construct, operate, and maintain a cable communications system in Baltimore in and across streets and public ways beginning 11/1/2016, allowing Comcast of Baltimore City, LLC exclusive access to infrastructure needed to provide and maintain Internet connectivity to residents;

Whereas, Affordable high-speed internet connections are vitally important for the education and future employment of Baltimore's children, yet access to technology is inequitably distributed across lines of race and socioeconomic class;

Whereas, Access to affordable high-speed internet connections are critical to employment opportunities, access to telehealth and health care providers for residents across Baltimore, yet high-speed Internet access is inequitably distributed across lines of race and class;

Whereas, According to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, approximately 40.7% of all Baltimore households have no broadband internet access;

Whereas, According to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, 19,200 households with children in Baltimore have no broadband internet access;

Whereas, In 2018, the Government and Accountability Office (GAO) found that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) overestimates broadband deployment by “counting an entire census block as served if only one location has broadband.”;

Whereas, The GAO also found the FCC data overstated deployment by “allowing providers to report availability in blocks where they do not have any infrastructure connecting homes to their networks if the providers determine they could offer service to at least one household.”;

Whereas, Baltimore trails behind many cities when it comes to the number of households with home Internet connections, with the 2013 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau ranking Baltimore 261 out of 296 cities surveyed. National research indicates that lower-income and racial minority households are disproportionately disconnected from the internet;

Whereas, Starting on March 16, 2020, all Baltimore City public schools closed at the direction of the Maryland State Department of Education and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic;

Whereas, Starting on March, 19, 2020, a State of Emergency in Baltimore City was declared, closing libraries, non-essential businesses, recreational facilities, dining establishments and more locations in and at which students and adults without home Internet connections are dependent for school, work, healthcare access, and more;

Whereas, On April 6, 2020, Baltimore City public schools began distance learning for all students with educational content broadcast on the City’s cable television access channels and posted online to the City Schools’ website. Teachers began engaging students on a variety of online platforms to give live instruction and host class assignments and resources;

Whereas, More than 14,000 Baltimore youth between the ages of 14 and 21 applied for jobs through YouthWorks for the summer of 2020. Children in Baltimore rely on these summer jobs for work experience and a vital source of income for themselves and their families. This year Youthworks has converted to a “telework” to promote the safety and technological skills of our youth;

Whereas, Students continue to need Internet access to equitably participate in SAT preparation, International Baccalaureate, and Advanced Placement plus other remediation and enrichment coursework over the summer;

Whereas, On March 12, 2020, Comcast opened its Internet Essentials program [to qualifying low-income residents] free for 60 days in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whereas, The Comcast Internet Essentials program provides maximum download speeds of 25mbps, and maximum upload speed of 3mbps;

Whereas, According to Kagan, a media research group within S&P Global Market Intelligence, 45.7% of households in the United States currently subscribe to broadband Internet packages with download speeds of at least 100/10mbps, leaving a significant number of historically underserved students in Baltimore digitally disenfranchised relative to the general population;

Whereas, The Comcast free Internet Essentials program expires on June 30, 2020;

Whereas, During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Harvard Center for Global Economic Development

recommends: “if not all students have devices and connectivity, look for ways to provide them to those students. Explore partnerships with the private sector and the community in securing the resources to provide those devices and connectivity.”; and

Whereas, In 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Council declared access to broadband as a universal human right.

Now, therefore, be it resolved by the City Council of Baltimore, That the City Council calls on Comcast to permanently increase the Internet Essentials download speed to 100 Mbps and upload speed to 25 Mbps;

And be it further resolved, That the Council calls on Comcast to extend the free Internet Essentials offer for low income residents until 60 days after the complete reopening of public schools;

And be it further resolved, That the Council calls on Comcast to make all existing Xfinity hotspots free to the public for 60 days after the full restoration of school.

And be it further resolved, That a copy of this Resolution be sent to the Mayor’s Office, the Mayor’s Office of Cable and Communications, the Senior Vice President of Government and Regulatory Relations of the North East Division of Comcast Cable, and the Mayor’s Legislative Liaison to the City Council.