

# US Senate's internet access plan rests on better broadband maps

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The Senate's bipartisan infrastructure bill makes a \$42.5 billion bet that the government will overcome an obstacle that has long plagued efforts to connect most Americans to the internet: notoriously inaccurate maps showing where they can get a signal—and where they can't.

That's the amount of grant funding that the legislation, which the Senate passed earlier this month on a 69-30 vote, would provide to states to fund broadband projects in areas currently considered unserved or underserved. To qualify, proposals would have to comply with new

broadband maps drawn by the Federal Communications Commission.

There's one catch: The new maps don't exist yet. And they may not be ready to go for one or two years, experts say.

Though the consensus is that the new maps will be an improvement over the status quo, states and private-sector companies are moving forward with their own solutions.

Better broadband maps have been a priority for Democratic and Republican administrations. Last year, former President Donald Trump signed a law (requiring the FCC to draw more detailed maps than the current ones, which provide data only as granular as the census block level. Congress provided \$65 million to fund that effort.

The maps have been a priority for the acting FCC chairwoman, Jessica Rosenworcel, who formed a Broadband Data Task Force after taking control of the agency. The agency recently awarded a contract for the development of its broadband data collection system, which will gather location-specific data on 3G, 4G LTE, and 5G signal availability.

The commission also adopted regulations that will require internet service providers to submit more granular and standardized data. The regulations, which have not been implemented yet, will also allow state and local governments and other third-party entities to challenge private-sector data, which has proven imprecise in the past.

"The FCC is moving as quickly as possible to be able to collect the data that we need to create better broadband maps," FCC spokesperson Anne Veigle said in a statement. "Fixed broadband service will be reported on a location-by-location basis, and mobile broadband availability will be based on standardized parameters that will permit apples-to-apples comparisons of providers' networks."

But the sheer scale of the project means better maps could still be far off, experts say.

"The FCC is a deliberative federal agency, so it's moving slowly," said Christopher Ali, an associate professor of media studies at the University of Virginia. "I think their heart is in the right place in terms of wanting to produce the best maps. But it's probably going to take another two years."

Michael O'Rielly, a former FCC commissioner who served from 2014 to 2020, said the agency's work on the new maps suggests that they'll be a significant improvement.

"Inevitably, the new maps are going to have some flaws," said O'Rielly, a Republican. "But they can improve dramatically from where they have been before."

Private companies have lined up to offer their assistance. One of those companies is Lightbox, a commercial real estate information firm that maintains a database of every address in the United States. Realizing that its platform could be useful for broadband, the company helped Georgia draw maps considered some of the most accurate in the country.

"The big difference between what we did in Georgia and what the FCC has now is that we mapped it down to the property structure level versus a census tract level," said Caroline Stoll, the company's head of sales and strategic partnerships. "We now have the ability to solve this both nationally and at a state level. And it's with a commercial, off-the-shelf product."

But Georgia isn't the only state waiting around for the FCC to produce new maps. With billions in coronavirus relief funding still waiting to be spent, states like Pennsylvania, Maine and South Carolina have moved

forward with their own mapping projects.

"I've got lots of 6-year-olds at home with no internet," said Jim Stritzinger, who directs the broadband office at the South Carolina Office of Regulatory Staff. "And it's not like I can wait around for the [FCC] data to get better. I've got to figure a path forward with what I have."

What he has is quite good. Stritzinger, an engineer by trade, has mapped out [broadband](#) access and availability across each of South Carolina's counties. He then breaks each county down into areas of need and provides the data to county governments.

"As a county administrator, when you're equipped with this level of data, you can very quickly prioritize where you want to go first, second, and third," he said.

Three other states have reached out to Stritzinger about his mapping methodology, he says. It doesn't surprise him that states are leaning into building their own maps. Even if they need to comply with the FCC's new maps for funding, at least they would have accurate maps of their own to challenge possibly inaccurate data.

"It's like being a doc in a triage situation, you can't wait around for perfect data to show up, I have to move now," Stritzinger said. "And we're able to do it pretty accurately."

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