



PLANNING AND BUILDING DEPARTMENT

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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NOTICE OF PREPARATION AND SCOPING MEETING

El Dorado County Broadband Fiber Project Environmental Impact Report

Project Title: El Dorado County Broadband Fiber Project

Project Applicant: El Dorado County

Comment Period: August 26, 2024, through September 30, 2024

Scoping Meeting: September 25, 2024, at 3:00pm
VIRTUALLY (<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/84816144209>)

Lead Agency: El Dorado County

Contact: Kyle Zimbelman, Economic and Business Relations Manager
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Notice is hereby given that the El Dorado County (County) will be the Lead Agency in preparation of a program Environmental Impact Report (EIR) consistent with California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines (14 California Code of Regulations Section 1500, et seq.), that addresses the potential physical environmental effects of the El Dorado County Broadband Fiber Project (proposed Project). In accordance with CEQA Guidelines Section 15082, the County has prepared this Notice of Preparation (NOP) to provide responsible agencies and other interested parties with sufficient information describing the proposal and its potential environmental effects to meaningfully respond.

PROJECT SETTING AND LOCATION

The El Dorado County Broadband Fiber Project (proposed Project) would be located within the unincorporated areas of the County and within the two incorporated cities within the County, the City of Placerville and City of South Lake Tahoe. The County is located in northern California, bordered by Placer County to the north, Amador and Alpine counties to the south, and Sacramento County to the west; the state of Nevada borders El Dorado County to the east. The County is located in the central Sierra Nevada, east of the Central Valley. The County covers approximately 1,789 square miles (1,145,385 acres) ranging from the residential foothills of El Dorado Hills to the high Sierra Nevada mountain range. Several major roadways including U.S. 50 and State Routes (SRs) 49, 88, and 89 traverse the County. Elevations range from 200 feet above sea level (amsl) at the western end of the County to 10,881 feet atop Freel Peak on the edge of the Lake Tahoe Basin. Placerville and South Lake Tahoe are the two incorporated cities within the County; however, there are other several unincorporated communities located throughout the County.

PROJECT NEED

Broadband provides high-speed internet access via multiple types of technologies, including fiber optics, wireless, cable modem, digital subscriber line (DSL), broadband over powerlines (BPL), and satellite. The proposed Project would utilize fiber optic technology that converts light electrical signals and sends the light through transparent glass fibers about the diameter of a human hair (FCC 2023). Fiber optic technology transmits data at speeds far exceeding current DSL or cable modem speeds.

While some areas of the County have sufficient internet speeds for daily work and home life, there are still large portions of the County with no coverage or coverage so slow that it has become prohibitive to perform daily, essential tasks. Providing broadband internet in the County has been challenging for a several reasons. Primarily, the topography and geography of the County present physical barriers to broadband connectivity. Subsurface rock throughout the County is difficult and expensive to trench while dense forests, hills, and canyons may obstruct the sight lines needed for wireless technology. Finally, the County is rural in nature and its population densities are too low to attract market-rate broadband infrastructure investors.

The proposed Project provides an opportunity to address the lack of broadband service in many areas of the County. The proposed Project would help attract broadband infrastructure investors to bring broadband service to a County in need of reliable connectivity for increasing health and safety factors, as well as for economic and quality of life reasons. Expansion of broadband service and its associated infrastructure is vital to the various communities and cities in the County for many reasons, which include but are not limited to:

- building social and community connections,
- bolstering economic development and sustainability,
- increasing telework and skilled workforce training, and
- enhancing telemedicine.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As the Lead Agency, the County is proposing to expand access to fiber optic broadband technology throughout the unincorporated and incorporated areas of the County. The proposed Project would install fiber optic lines either underground in buried conduits, overhead on existing or newly constructed utility poles, or in a combination of both. It is anticipated that the depth of excavation for buried conduits would be 5 feet. Additionally, the maximum height of new utility poles would be 100 feet. The majority of future broadband infrastructure would be constructed within the typical roadway cross-section within the unincorporated areas of the County, the incorporated cities of Placerville and South Lake Tahoe, or California Department of Transportation's (Caltrans') public rights-of-way (ROW). However, broadband infrastructure could also be constructed on private disturbed land and federal land. The exact alignment of future broadband infrastructure is currently unknown at this time and would be planned based on such considerations as construction feasibility, local preference, and locations of sensitive environmental resources.

Underground fiber optic conduit or aboveground utility poles would typically be located in previously disturbed and/or developed areas (e.g., in ROW). Many of these fiber optic conduits or utility poles would generally follow the route of the roadway, particularly if the applicable areas have other issues that could affect access, such as vegetation, geologic, landscape, and/or water features that should not be disturbed. The fiber optic infrastructure could follow other utility installations; therefore, it is likely that the ground along these alignments has been previously disturbed by prior utility work. The proposed Project

conservatively assumes that new ground disturbance would be required for the entire Project; however, there would be potential for utilizing existing conduit or utility poles where only installation of fiber optic lines would be required. Existing conduit or utility poles could be located within public or private utility easements throughout the County or cities. If deemed feasible, the new broadband infrastructure constructed under the proposed Project would connect to existing broadband infrastructure (e.g., aboveground, and belowground) in the Project area supported by existing internet service providers (ISPs).

EIR SCOPE

The EIR will evaluate the direct and indirect significant environmental impacts of the proposed project. The County has determined that the EIR shall evaluate the following CEQA topic areas in accordance with Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines:

- Aesthetics
- Agriculture and Forestry Resources
- Air Quality
- Biological Resources
- Cultural Resources
- Energy
- Geology and Soils
- Greenhouse Gas Emissions
- Hazards and Hazardous Materials
- Hydrology and Water Quality
- Land Use and Planning
- Mineral Resources
- Noise
- Population and Housing
- Public Services
- Recreation
- Transportation
- Tribal Cultural Resources
- Utilities and Service Systems
- Wildfire

Cumulative impacts will consider impacts of relevant projects in and around the Project area combined with those of the proposed Project. An evaluation of Project alternatives that could reduce significant impacts will also be included in the EIR.

To ensure that the EIR for this proposed Project is thorough and adequate and ensure that the issues of concern to the public and public agencies are addressed, the County is requesting comments and guidance on the scope and content of the EIR from interested public agencies, organizations, and individuals. Public comments on the scope of issues to be evaluated in the EIR are encouraged. With respect to the views of Responsible and Trustee Agencies as to significant environmental issues, the County needs to know the reasonable alternatives and mitigation measures that are germane to each agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the Project.

ALTERNATIVES

In accordance with Section 15126.6 of the CEQA Guidelines, an EIR must “describe a range of reasonable alternatives to the project, or to the location of the project, which would feasibly attain most of the basic objectives of the project but would avoid or substantially lessen any of the significant effects of the project and evaluate the comparative merits of the alternatives.” As required by CEQA, the EIR will evaluate a No Project Alternative. Aside from the No Project Alternative, the County has not yet determined what additional alternatives to the Project will be evaluated in the EIR. These will be identified during the environmental review process. Once selected, the alternatives will be analyzed at a qualitative level of detail in the Draft EIR for comparison against the impacts identified for the Project, consistent with the requirements of CEQA.

SCOPING MEETING

A Public Scoping Meeting would be held virtually on September 25, 2024, at 3:00pm. Please use this link to join the meeting: <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/84816144209>

PUBLIC REVIEW PERIOD

As specified by the CEQA Guidelines, the NOP will be circulated for a 30-day review period. The public review period is from August 26, 2024, through September 30, 2024. Please send all written comments to Kyle Zimbelman, County of El Dorado, at the address shown above or email to economic.development@edcgov.us with "El Dorado County Broadband Fiber Project Environmental Impact Report" as the subject. Public agencies providing comments are asked to include a contact person for the agency.

Comments on the NOP are due no later than the close of the 30-day review period at 5:00 p.m. on September 30, 2024.