What are internet deserts?

An internet desert is an area that lacks affordable, reliable, high speed internet access.

In general, people have access to technology, such as computers and phones. They need high-speed access to the internet.

There is no market incentive for companies to reach these low income families. As a result, there is very little competition among consumer-facing broadband providers.

According to the FCC, almost two-thirds of Houston has 2 or fewer broadband providers.

The lack of competition means that prices stay the same or go up, making high speed internet less affordable.
What contributes to internet deserts?

- Lack of market demand at current prices means poorer neighborhoods are among the last to get technology innovations.

- Lack of competition among broadband providers means there is no incentive to compete on price or accessibility.

- The FCC’s recent elimination of the lifeline program, which provided a $20/month subsidy for home broadband.

- Lack of clarity about the law and high cost utility pole regulation effectively eliminate startups and municipal-run broadband.
What about 5G?

● Verizon has installed its 5G network throughout Houston, prioritizing Complete Communities neighborhoods.

● Currently, 5G is only available for home internet. So a subscriber has to live in a 5G service area.

● 5G might not have the same level of accessibility as fiber: 5G requires a direct line of sight to the tower (eliminating customers with trees or buildings in the way), while fiber is wired up to every home in the neighborhood.

● **5G is a big step forward but only a small part of the overall solution.**
Broadband internet is still out of reach for many

- Verizon 5G home internet regular rate is **$70 per month**, or $50 per month if you are an existing Verizon Wireless subscriber.

- Comparable AT&T and Comcast home internet regular rates are **$60 per month**.

- The introduction of a new network does not help affordability yet.

- Some providers offer low-cost internet packages, but they are not high speed (~15 Mbps).
What can the City of Houston do?

- Conduct a study to understand how low income families access the internet in the City of Houston (per CM Edwards budget amendment below).

The City of Houston (1) shall commission a survey and detailed report of Houstonians’ home Internet usage or lack thereof to identify “Internet Deserts”; and (2) shall issue an RFP to identify one or more Internet service providers that are willing to commit to deploying advanced wireline and wireless that can provide high-speed Internet to residences and businesses at low and no-cost in areas that may lack access to connectivity, including but not limited to those communities in the Complete Communities Initiative.

- Establish a public/private partnership grant program to make home internet more affordable to those who need it.

- Negotiate with broadband providers to establish plans for low income Houstonians that provide comparable speeds to their market-rate plans.

- Add broadband compatibility provisions to single and multi-family building codes, similar to HUD.