

News

LITTLE BROADBAND PROGRESS IN CALAVERAS

By **Dana M. Nichols**

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SAN ANDREAS - Halfway through a two-year effort to expand broadband to the slower dial-up pockets in the Mother Lode and other rural parts of California, Calaveras County is making only spotty progress.

Michelle Shelton, who coordinates the state-funded effort for the region that includes Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Mariposa and Tuolumne counties, reported this week to the Calaveras County Board of supervisors that residents here say they want broadband, but service providers and government agencies are not cooperating as well as they might to make it happen.

Shelton said that only three of 25 "shovel-ready" projects she's mustered so far within the five-county region are in Calaveras County.

And except for one significant project in which the Calaveras County Sheriff's Department is cooperating with other counties to improve law enforcement telecommunications coverage, the projects in Calaveras are very small.

In contrast, neighboring counties Amador and Tuolumne have come up with a number of viable projects, including such measures as creating public wireless Internet zones in libraries and other public buildings.

"We need more shovel-ready projects, especially digital divide projects, in Calaveras County," Shelton said.

Also, private Internet and cellular telephone providers have been applying for grant funding individually, reluctant to cooperate because they fear revealing proprietary information, Shelton said.

"They are not going to get nearly as much money as if they applied together," Shelton said.

That is more urgent now than when the state launched its \$100 million utility bill surcharge-funded effort to shore up rural broadband infrastructure in early 2008.

The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act will soon send about \$1 billion in broadband infrastructure funding to California, Shelton said.

And applying now for the first of three rounds of such infrastructure funding gives rural counties such as Calaveras their best chance, because large urban counties won't have enough time to draft their more complex proposals, Shelton said.

Meanwhile, a random telephone survey of residents in the region found that about 40 percent said they wished they had high-speed Internet access, Shelton said. But Shelton said that there appears to be confusion, because a significant proportion of the 40 percent who believe they don't have broadband actually live in areas that supposedly do have at least DSL service.

Shelton said that the survey included more than 100 Calaveras County residents as well as hundreds more from the other counties.

Hathaway Pines resident Mary Boblet, who has been tracking efforts to bring federal stimulus dollars to Calaveras County, urged county officials to help Shelton come up with more projects.

"There are really good reasons for bringing this funding into our community," Boblet said, noting benefits that ranged from improved health care provided via tele-medicine to improved home values in areas with broadband service.

Supervisor Steve Wilensky asked Shelton what county officials can do to help.

Shelton said they should come up with projects and attend an April 17 hearing in San Andreas at which a Central

Sierra Connect advisory committee will meet to come up with a plan to assemble an application for funding before a deadline in early June.

Central Sierra Connect is the regional broadband project funded with a \$250,000 California Emerging Technology Fund grant. Central Sierra Connect is a project of the Amador-Tuolumne Community Action Agency.

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