

Struggling to make broadband broadly available

Tina Nerat For the Times-Standard

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Last September, Del Norte, Humboldt, Mendocino and Trinity counties embarked on a regional broadband project, managed by HSU and funded by a variety of sources, including the California Emerging Technology Fund, Humboldt Area Foundation, McLean Foundation, RREDC and the Headwaters Fund. This month the team has briefed the Board of Supervisors in all four counties.

The project's goal is broadband demand aggregation for our rural region, including Del Norte, Humboldt, Mendocino and Trinity counties. The intent is to begin to understand and build a robust broadband market by increasing the supply of services (especially to under-served areas and constituencies) while at the same time growing business and home consumer demand.

There are 17 broadband providers in the Redwood Region, and they include telephone companies, cable companies, wireless Internet service providers (WISPs) and ISPs who resell DSL or wireless services.

Seven community meetings were attended by 265 residents this past winter in Crescent City, Weaverville, Ft Bragg, Ukiah, Willow Creek, Redway and Eureka. Ft Bragg attendance was a whopping 90 people, showing unmet demand on the Mendocino Coast. About half of the broadband providers attended the meetings.

A survey was developed and administered in several

ways. The telephone survey was by random dialing and can be generalized to the overall population. There was a separate survey targeted at businesses. Surveys done online and at meetings or mailed in were called "targeted surveys" or "self-selecting surveys" and are a measure of demand but can't be generalized to the overall population.

The surveys were intended to increase awareness of broadband, ask about current means of accessing the Internet, measure demand and determine willingness to pay for broadband service.

The data collected is too extensive to be discussed here, so I'll just share a few items. The phone survey shows that 90 percent of residents have a landline and a personal computer. Sixty-three percent also consider Internet access at home to be either critical or very important. More than 70 percent of businesses rated broadband critical or very important.

Both the community meeting and telephone surveys indicate that more than 30 percent use dial-up to access the Internet. As we all know, dial-up is problematic for accessing most Web sites, for transferring any files and for doing business. We've got to get better broadband coverage so the 30-plus percent can come into the 21st century.

Mapping of the four-county region has taken a large portion of the project time. The original plan had been to use the California Broadband Task Force maps for Redwood Coast Connect, which were released midway into the project. But we determined the maps to be inaccurate, so we decided to gather our own mapping data. This turned out to be a larger challenge than expected since very little data was already in Geographic Information System format. I had to call every provider and ask for data, which came in every format imaginable, from GIS to a AAA map marked with highlighter.

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It's no surprise to residents in the following Humboldt towns that there's no broadband available: Briceland, Bridgeville, Crannell, Fort Seward, Holmes, Korb, Myers Flat, Orick, Orleans, Phillipsville, Redcrest, Richardson Grove and Weott. Other towns are partially served, including Bayside, Carlotta, Hydesville, Fieldbrook, Kneeland and Willow Creek.

Right now we're in the middle of analysis of the supply and demand data. We'll be proposing alternatives that are most likely for each of the unserved towns.

Some of the surprises thus far in the project are:

- * Huge gains in broadband coverage, primarily due to WISPs (fixed wireless) and mobile/cellular broadband. Humboldt County's coverage looks far better than it did just 18 months ago.
- * Good coverage by smaller phone companies.
- * Openness of sharing information by some providers and conversely, extreme reluctance by others.

The project has confirmed what we already knew:

- * Infrastructure is deteriorating in some areas.
- * Backhaul (or "middle mile" to the Internet) cost and availability is a huge barrier to ubiquitous broadband in our region.
- * We need alternative fiber coming into the county to provide greater reliability.

It will take many different options to bring broadband to all of us on the North Coast. Stay tuned for the final report in late summer. Results will be presented at the Fourth Annual Broadband Forum

on August 21.

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