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California gains stimulus funds for broadband Internet

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California will receive some of the first federal stimulus money to close the so-called digital divide, but it's angling for much more.

On Monday, the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration awarded the first four grants under its State Broadband Data and Development Grant Program.

The California Public Utilities Commission landed about $1.8 million to collect and verify the availability, speed and location of broadband Internet service across the state, plus $500,000 for broadband planning costs over four years.

Indiana, North Carolina, and Vermont also received grants totaling about $4.5 million under the program.

Sunne Wright McPeak, president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, a nonprofit group underwritten by four merged phone companies to oversee one effort to expand the use of broadband, said Tuesday that California's award is a good start but that the state is hoping to receive as much as $1 billion in additional stimulus money to expand broadband service statewide.

"We hope it's going to happen over time," she said. "This particular pot of money was processed separately, but there's much more yet to be awarded."

The competition among states for the big money is enormous. McPeak said there are $28 billion in applications from states, nonprofit groups and others for an available $4 billion.

To complicate things further, several federal agencies are involved in the process. McPeak said the first round of larger awards likely won't be announced until late November or early December.

One of the key considerations in the process will be what constitutes a rural area, and how best to bring broadband service to those regions.

That issue also was emphasized in a report released Monday by Valley Vision, the nonprofit Sacramento-based think tank. The three-month Regional Broadband Scoping Study investigated ways to improve digital access in the six-county Sacramento region.

The study said regional businesses, particularly in health care, stand to benefit from high-speed, digital access, but current assets are "underutilized and there is no cohesive strategy to improve the status quo."

Valley Vision's study noted that "broadband is the education backbone for the region, critical to bridging the digital divide

for both parents and children, and to foster economic development. Yet many rural school districts lack broadband access and availability ... "

The federal stimulus money for expanded broadband service is a byproduct of a key Obama administration goal: getting more Americans hooked up to high-speed Internet.

California's situation is typical of the nation. About 96 percent of California households have access to a high-speed Internet connection, but 45 percent of residents don't have broadband connections in their homes because of geography, disabilities, a lack of English skills or poverty.

Most of the state's 4 percent lacking broadband service are in less-populated rural regions that aren't financially attractive enough to lure big companies.

McPeak pointed to studies showing that the faster the Internet connection, the more people will use it. She said it's unacceptable that almost half the residents of a state with California's reputation for embracing cutting-edge technology are not hooked up to broadband.

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MichaelLandon wrote on 10/08/2009 06:30:14 AM:

"McPeak pointed to studies showing that the faster the Internet connection, the more people will use it. She said it's unacceptable that almost half the residents of a state with California's reputation for embracing cutting-edge technology are not hooked up to broadband. " How many of these folks even hav a computer? Will the taxpayers be buying computers for the "underserved" next?

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