

Supervisors support effort to expand broadband, vote for zone of benefit subsidy

Written by Elizabeth Larson

Wednesday, 09 June 2010

LAKEPORT – The Board of Supervisors gave unanimous consent to sending a letter of support for a fund meant to expand high speed Internet service.

The letter will support the SB 1040, an urgency measure meant to extend the sunset of the California Advanced Services Fund (CASF). The bill is scheduled to go before the Assembly Utilities and Commerce Committee on June 14.

County Public Services Analyst Terre Logsdon – who County Administrative Officer Kelly Cox said has become the county's resident expert on broadband – took the matter to the board for its approval.

Over the past year, several Internet service providers have asked the county for support letters to pursue stimulus funds to expand broadband service into the county's unserved, and underserved, areas, Logsdon explained, noting that such areas exist in every supervisorial district in the county.

She said the California Public Utilities Commission initiated the California Emerging Technology Fund, which Lake County has participated with for the last few years in a rural consortia to expand high speed Internet.

The CASF was established with \$100 million in December 2007, and provides up to a 40 percent match for the total project cost for broadband projects, leaving the business to come up with the other 60 percent, she said.

In rural areas like Lake County, expanding Internet service can be "exorbitantly expensive," Logsdon said. That's despite the fact that high speed fiber has been installed in many areas of Lake County and Northern California.

While some of that fiber is "dark" – or hasn't been activated – Logsdon said the CASF allows companies to take the chance on expanding those services. The program sunsets Jan. 1, 2013.

The CPUC must approve all projects that go through the fund. Logsdon said the CPUC has allowed CASF funds to be used for companies that didn't offer telephone services but would provide broadband in both rural and urban areas.

Applications are currently pending for stimulus funds that would expand broadband in unserved and underserved areas and CASF funding also can be used as the required match if a company is awarded federal funds, Logsdon said.

She said several companies in round one of applications for the funding were seeking to do projects in Lake County, with one of them, Broadband Associates, approved for CASF funding. That project would have provided services primarily to schools, hospitals and colleges. However, she said that project did not receive the stimulus funds, so it was later pulled.

In the first round of funding, Lake County wasn't considered "rural," Logsdon said, but that has since been changed for the next application round.

The letter she took to the board offered support for another \$125 million to be collected from a very small surcharge on phone bills over the next five years, beginning in 2010-11. Logsdon said that funding would cover infrastructure costs.

For the CASF's second round of funding, there is one application that would serve Lake County. Logsdon said the funds will continue supporting the broadband consortia of which Lake county is a part.

"There's a lot of passion around this issue in the county," said Logsdon.

She said the county administration has heard from people from all parts of Lake County who don't have broadband access, and what it means for their lives. The people who have weighed in range from grandparents who want to be able to get on Skype to visit with their grandchildren to young people who want to listen to music or learn to play it, to clinics that want to tap into telemedicine services.

Logsdon said the county plans to host a July town hall to bring together all of the current service providers that have

expressed interest in expanding services, along with residents and businesses that are clamoring for service. At that time they'll also try to identify community champions who are passionate about broadband and can carry the effort forward.

Supervisor Jim Comstock asked if the CASF surcharge is being applied cell phones as well. Logsdon said no, only landlines, she believes. Comstock noted that is becoming a limited group.

Logsdon told the board that the CPUC has provided broadband area maps of the area, but the maps are flawed because they're based on census blocks. If one person has high speed Internet it shows the area as having it.

Supervisor Rob Brown asked if it will help businesses compete against Mediacom. Logsdon said yes, however, companies that get federal stimulus funding can only provide services in areas that aren't served or are underserved.

"Being served by Mediacom is being undeserved," Brown said, adding, "They're awful."

Brown asked about fiber optic cable that exists in the county but isn't being used. Logsdon said one line of fiber comes in at Highway 20 and 53 from Colusa County, but it's dark because the company says it's too old.

Another fiber line comes up Highway 29 from Lower Lake, but Brown pointed out it's passing through the county, and doesn't offer service here.

Logsdon said that's a big issue around Northern California – fiber lines passing through to provide service to other areas, but not allowing local access.

Cox said when that fiber line was being laid the county looked into whether or not they could require local access because public right-of-way was being used.

Another facility supplied with high speed Internet is the former Cheap Tickets building in Lakeport, which Board Chair Anthony Farrington noted is sitting dark.

Cox said wireless technology is more feasible, as they would never be able to run a line to every house. He also noted that Mediacom doesn't serve everyone in its service area.

From an economic development standpoint, Cox said his interest has been to support small businesses that can use broadband and, at the same time, support the county's rural atmosphere. He said he knows of a few businesses operating very successfully on the Internet.

Supervisor Denise Rushing said the goal is to get cost effective projects. "It sounds like we've got some projects that might make it," she said, adding that broadband expansion reminds her of the county's rural electrification process.

Cox noted that the goal was affordable broadband. Farrington said in the evolving economy, communications will be critical, comparing the process to expanding highway lanes.

He credited Logsdon with helping to establish an excellent working relationship with the California Emerging Technology Fund.

Rushing moved to approve sending the letter, which the board approved 5-0.

Board approves zone of benefit subsidy, storm damage repair projects

The board also voted to use up to \$100,000 to subsidize a balloting process for the Orchard Shores benefit zone, which is meant to repave the subdivision's battered streets.

Zones of benefit allow residents in an area to band together to pay for street repairs. County Public Works Director Brent Siemer said the county subsidy would lower the cost per resident to \$120 annually.

However, a new bill, AB 1409, would make the Orchard Shores project a major one, meaning that Lake County Public Works couldn't do the project but would need to contract it out. That could add another \$30,000 on to the project, for a total of about \$130,000, Siemer said.

Rushing said the roads in that area are in very bad shape. Siemer said the road has failed to the point of needing to be complete reconstructed.

Area resident Michael Dunlap opposed the project, saying he didn't want public road crews doing that kind of work, explaining that it should be contracted out.

Brown said the county road crews will end up fixing the road anyway because it's in such bad shape.

Rushing acknowledged concerns about such projects. "I think the jury's out on zones of benefit but point taken," she said, suggesting they agendize a future discussion on how the zones are done.

She moved to approve the subsidy, which the board approved 5-0.

The board also approved awarding bids for storm damage repairs on Bartlett Springs Road, \$448,485, and Soda Bay Road, \$142,755.65; and the award of a bid for the Kelseyville Water Main Replacement Project for \$135,000.

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Couldn't agree with Rob

written by Donna Christopher, June 09, 2010

more. Mediacom is a monopoly and one only needs to call customer service regarding the outages to experience the joys of a monopoly. Having a choice would be wonderful. The potential for job creation in home based businesses would stand a better chance if we had true choice. Thanks Supes!

You would think

written by bearer, June 09, 2010

that scientology people could use their space ships to beam the internet down for free.

Hollywood could do that much for us all.

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