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Riverbank program to demystify the Net

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RIVERBANK --]

Norman Comer has owned two computers, but soon gave them to his grandson because of his frustration in trying to use them.

But the 70-year-old Comer says he's eager to take advantage of the free Wi-Fi, low-cost computers and training being offered to him and other Riverbank Housing Authority residents through a program that brings the online world to underserved communities.

"I'm kind of stupid when it comes to computers," he said. "But I'm determined to keep it this time. You can find a lot of information you need."

Housing Authority board chairman John Degele said he expects residents to be surfing the Internet in a month. He added that he expects 50 percent to 75 percent of the authority's 90 households to participate. The authority has 60 apartments for seniors and 30 for families, and about 150 residents.

Degele said the program includes:

- Free Wi-Fi for three years
- Free computer training
- Refurbished computers at a cost of about \$250
- Housing Authority loans of as much as \$400 to purchase a computer and/or printer; the loans are interest-free and payable over two years.

Internet partnership

The program is part of Bring IT Home, a partnership between the California Emerging Technology Fund, AT&T and the One Economy Corp. The partnership works to increase Internet access in underserved communities.

The partnership picked Riverbank in August 2009. Besides bringing Wi-Fi to the Housing Authority, Bring IT Home planned to wire as many as 1,000 low-income Riverbank homes with broadband, help residents buy low-cost computers and offer computer training.

The program did not live up to initial expectations. City officials said about 50 low-income homes received broadband and a handful of low-cost computers were sold to low-income residents at one computer fair.

"This partnership did not work the way we expected," said Raquel Cinat, a CETF associate vice president. She said the partners hope to talk with Riverbank and the seven other California cities in the program next month for a status report.

Passing it on

But Riverbank officials praised the Digital Connectors program in which young people were taught computer and Internet skills and then passed on their knowledge to seniors and others who needed high-tech help.

The Digital Connectors trained about 80 residents. The program has since been disbanded, but computer training now is being offered through the CASA del Rio Family Resource Center.

Degele said some of his agency's delays in getting the program running were caused by staff turnover at One Economy, which is implementing the program, and the Housing Authority's review of the program.

Degele said the Housing Authority's only cost will be \$6,100 for the third year of Wi-Fi. AT&T is paying for the first two years.

Comer said he and a few of his neighbors at his eight-unit senior complex can't wait to go online. He said he's eager to keep up with his daughters through their Facebook pages and wants to learn how to use e-mail. Comer said he's also interested in exploring genealogy Web sites.

"This will be good for us old folks," he said.

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