

CITY

Broadband By The People, For The People

Central Coast Broadband Consortium works to bridge the area's 'digital divide'

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Published May 24, 2012 at 12:17 pm

A 65-foot flatbed truck filled with computers offering free Internet access to migrant laborers is one project among many aimed at promoting universal broadband access along the Central Coast.

The group behind it is the Central Coast Broadband Consortium (CCBC), which aims to bridge the “digital divide” in Santa Cruz, San Benito and Monterey counties.

“The digital divide means those who are not connected,” said Gladys Palpallatoc, associate vice president of the California Emerging Technologies Fund (CETF), “those who aren’t seeing the benefits of technology as it advances, much less being online.”

The percentage of Californians with an Internet connection in their home increased from 55 percent in 2008 to 72 percent in 2011, according to a survey taken by the CETF. The 2011 survey also found that this number is significantly lower among underrepresented groups and those who are disabled, with only 55 percent of Latinos and 49 percent of disabled people in California having Internet access in their homes.

“Although we know that the pace of technology is quick and most folks will adapt,” said Gladys Palpallatoc, associate vice president of the CETF, “there are some folks who are already at a disadvantage, and those communities will only become more deeply disadvantaged without help.”



Illustration by Leigh Douglas

The CETF was born in 2005 from the dual mergers of AT&T with SBC and Verizon with MCI. As a condition of those mergers, the California Public Utilities Commission required that Verizon and AT&T pay \$60 million toward creating the CETF, a California nonprofit that works to ensure that rural, poor and otherwise disadvantaged communities are not left behind by the progress of broadband technologies.

A central component of its strategy is to organize and formalize regional groups throughout California already involved in broadband development, so that they might take note of the digital divide and attempt to address it.

“[The CCBC] was fairly loose-knit until the CETF provided some organizational structure in 2006, and then the stimulus of 2009 came along and that provided a real impetus to actually do something,” said Steve Blum, president of Tellus Venture, a private consulting firm specializing in community broadband development and a member group of the CCBC. “So that’s when the CCBC became an operating organization, as opposed to just a talking organization.”

The CCBC includes representatives from the cities of Santa Cruz, Watsonville and Monterey; CSU Monterey Bay; UCSC; local internet provider Cruzio and many other private companies, as well as nonprofits. Together they have recently unveiled two new projects designed to further “the mission of the CCBC, [which] is to plan for, build and connect the region’s disparate telecommunications networks and fill critical gaps,” according to the website of CSUMB’s Center for Wireless Education and Technology (WeTEC), a member of the CCBC.

The first of these was made possible by a \$4.9 million grant from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which will go toward establishing a series of Public Computing Centers (PCCs) throughout the Central Coast.

Spearheaded by Arlene Krebs, professor of communications at CSUMB and the founding director of WeTEC, the project has established over 30 PCCs throughout Monterey County so far and has plans to extend the program to Santa Cruz County.

The CCBC brings in computing equipment and broadband access to provide those who might not have access to the Internet with a place they can go to plug in and connect. The centers are housed in areas that already serve the community, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, libraries, the National Steinbeck Center, and Krebs’ personal project, the upgrading of a pre-existing CSUMB satellite campus into a PCC.

“The federal government says that we are the most diverse partnership in the U.S. that came together to do this sort of thing,” Krebs said.

The six-month-old PCC at the CSUMB satellite campus is in Salinas’ Chinatown, an area with a large proportion of the city’s homeless population who are the main beneficiaries of this center.

“The homeless people in that area have now connected with family,” Krebs said. “When you ask what the impact is, they now have email accounts, they now are on Facebook, they’re finding their friends, they’re finding their family, they’re learning new skills, they’re also enjoying entertainment once in a while — things that most of us just take for granted.”

This project’s second component is a 65-foot flatbed truck outfitted with 21 computing stations, which will serve Monterey’s agricultural workers by pulling up next to the fields and allowing them to use the Internet.

Other groups within the CCBC are in the midst of implementing a three-year-long planning and organizational strategy, aimed at creating a database of the Central Coast’s current broadband access and identifying key areas that can benefit from improvement. The project is funded by a \$450,000 grant from the California Advanced Services Fund. Work began on it in January.

As the CCBC’s initiatives take their course, Krebs and the other members are hopeful that they will achieve a lasting

impact on the Central Coast's residents and businesses. Still, money is tight, and the funding that created the PCCs is set to run out in six months.

Krebs is in the process of finding private donors who will keep the project going. She said as long as the CCBC continues to work hard, the Central Coast will see its digital divide become smaller year by year.

"You have to keep your eye on the prize. You have to be vigilant," Krebs said. "Because I've been working on this pup since 2002, and I'm not stopping now."

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