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Full broadband access possible within 2 years

By Laura Brown, laurab@theunion.com

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All western Nevada County residents could have broadband Internet service by 2010 - and people living in Sierra County could have complete coverage as early as this summer, said Gil Mathew, president of the county Economic Resource Council.

A \$240,000 grant from the California Emerging Technology Fund will pay for an aggregated broadband project being put into place by the Sierra Economic Development Corporation, based in Auburn. SEDCorp serves Nevada, Sierra, Placer and El Dorado counties.

"By the end of 2010, we'd like to have broadband for every citizen in the county. That's how we're marching," Mathew said.

Leaders throughout the region believe making broadband Internet access widely available will stimulate business growth.

Already, some professional families have moved into the area because they can stay connected to high-paying jobs elsewhere.

Many area businesses have significant sales on the Internet.

New wireless technology will make it all happen, Mathew said.

"It won't be as fast as a wire system, but it will be a lot faster than dial-up," Mathew said.

Bringing broadband to everyone will happen through a small, independent provider, not a large carrier like AT&T, Mathew said.

"They're way too slow and stodgy for this," Mathew said.

The grant will finance a study to determine how many people have and want broadband service and how much they would be willing to pay for it.

A broadband working group will use the grant to map existing infrastructure and entice providers to bring service to all four rural counties SEDCorp serves, Mathew said.

The wheels on the infrastructure project began moving a year ago, when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger set a statewide goal of achieving coverage for all counties by 2010. A fund of \$80 million was created to fund the project when AT&T and Cingular Wireless merged, Mathew said.

In western Nevada County, broadband coverage is available to 80 percent of residents, with about 30 percent of residents choosing to pay for broadband.

Some residents living in outlying areas of the county rely on slow dial-up service or pay for satellite and other alternatives.

Officials have been working with two providers interested in expanding into Sierra County, where Internet infrastructure lagged most behind. The county has struggled economically after traditional industries such as mining and logging died out.



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Complete broadband coverage can be reached there sooner because the population is small and providers would need to install fewer towers, Mathew said.

Broadband could give an economic boost to Downieville and Sierra City by attracting Internet-based businesses.

"They're working on this. The belief is Sierra County will probably have full broadband coverage before the end of the summer," Mathew said.

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