

Life without internet in Yolo County

By Don Saylor and Cecilia Aguiar-Curry

Access to high-speed Internet (broadband) is no longer a luxury. It is a basic necessity in both rural and urban settings to support our community members with their education, access to health care and economic competitiveness in today's digital economy. While Yolo County sits just to the west of the California state Capitol, funding for broadband infrastructure has been a consistent challenge.

Knights Landing is a rural community just 10 miles north of Woodland. Youth regularly gather outside the Knights Landing Library after hours. These students aren't congregating to cause trouble; they are accessing the library's Wi-Fi signal — the only high-speed internet available to them for homework and other needs.

In Knights Landing, a community of 1,000 residents — where 23.5 percent live below the poverty level, 14.7 percent are unemployed and 91 percent of school children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals — there is no affordable means for residents to access broadband (high-speed internet) at home.

The lack of connectivity in Knights Landing is not an isolated situation. This story is one we hear time and time again from people in the communities throughout Yolo County and beyond. These aren't mountaintop vacation homes lacking access to broadband; these are homes of hard-working residents who are an integral part of our community.

Access to adequate broadband isn't just a challenge to residents; it also impacts local businesses and their ability to use cutting-edge technologies. Adequate and affordable broadband infrastructure is necessary in today's digital economy. The many small and medium-sized businesses that cannot afford to build their own infrastructure in rural and urban communities must "get by" with high-cost mediocre service.

Turkovich Family Wines, an award-winning family winery, cannot implement state-of-the-art remote sensing for irrigation and water management in their fields due to lack of connectivity. At their new winery just 2 miles from their downtown Winters tasting room, the internet service is so poor they cannot use efficient inventory and customer database programs.

Inadequate broadband service is not limited to rural communities. Superior Farms, one of the largest providers of lamb in the country, recently relocated its headquarters, citing chronically

insufficient bandwidth at its Davis location, which was hindering the company's use of cloud-based internet services.

Assuring adequate internet access for people living and working in Yolo County is a collaborative effort. Yolo County is home to 210,000 people, four cities, UC Davis and a thriving agricultural economy. Yolo County's farms are a major contributor to Sacramento's Farm to Fork Capital movement.

To help preserve land for growing food, 88 percent of Yolo County's population lives within the cities with large expanses of agricultural land in between. This results in smaller cities and rural communities, offering a smaller market that apparently is not lucrative enough for private broadband providers to install new, or upgrade long-outdated, infrastructure. Closing the digital divide will require public and private solutions.

That is why we are supportive of the Internet For All Now Act to sustain the California Advanced Services Fund — the best mechanism the state has for funding high-speed internet in rural areas and getting all households online. CASF was established by the Legislature in 2008, and has since supported 56 broadband infrastructure projects that have reached more than 300,000 households.

The \$315 million collected has come at a low price — from charging 3 to 6 cents per month on Californians' phone bills. All the projects have required matching funds from cable and telecom companies.

We strongly encourage the Legislature to come together to forge a new broadband funding formula as soon as possible.

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