



We must bridge the Valley's gaping digital divide



BY SHELBY GONZALES

For the past decade, residents of Fresno, Madera and Tulare counties in California's Central Valley have waited for high-speed internet access.

We cheered when the state Legislature created the California Advanced Services Fund to pay for the laying of fiber-optic cable in rural areas. And we applauded when that fund spent \$46 million on the CENIC-CVIN project connecting more than 200,000 households and public institutions across the Central Valley. (CENIC-CVIN is the Corporation for Education Network Initiatives in California together with its private-sector partner the Central Valley Independent Network.)

But we are alarmed that the fate of CASF is uncertain. Some legislators don't seem to understand the reasons for the infrastructure costs of high-speed internet – and they don't seem to understand what happens when people find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Nor do they seem to care that in California, 47 percent of rural households still do not have access to reliable and fast internet – far from the legislative goal of 98 percent.

Here's what the wrong side of the digital divide looks like in the Valley:

- In Farmersville, a city of 10,000 in Tulare County, AT&T decided last year to reduce its footprint, leaving half of the city without coverage. High-speed fiber-optic cable is literally sitting across the street from City Hall, but Farmersville doesn't have the funds to connect to it.

Its current internet speeds are also dangerously slow; Police Department body cams take 12 to 18 hours to download, raising public safety concerns.

Farmersville also wants to open a public library with the 21st-century service of broadband (high-speed internet access), so students can do their homework and apply for college, and adults can apply for jobs and health insurance. But again, the funding mechanism that has worked best for rural Californians is out of money.

There are those who say CASF still has \$100 million to spend on last-mile projects like the one in Farmersville. That is not true. CASF is out of money for broadband infrastructure deployment – because there are 16 projects pending, totaling about \$154 million, and there is only \$100 million left in the fund. There are also many more projects that need funding.

CASF has spent its money wisely. Since 2008, it has capitalized 56 projects connecting more than 300,000 households to broadband, and has collected \$315 million from charging 3 to 6 cents per month on Californians' phone bills, while requiring significant matching funds from cable and telecom companies.

Renewing the fund is the best mechanism we have to get the remaining one-fifth of the state connected to our digital economy.

- Take the underserved communities of Cutler and Orosi. Thanks to the federal E-Rate system, which subsidizes broadband in schools, Cutler-Orosi Unified School District students can take their state exams in their classrooms and take advantage of the new frontier of digital learning. The school district has the ability to provide the whole community with internet at very high speeds, but it lacks one component and is looking for funding to complete the project.
- Or Parlier, a city of 15,000 in Fresno County, where the school district provides internet access via Verizon hotspots to the families of high school students. There haven't been affordable options for seniors or low-income residents who don't have children who can qualify them for Comcast's affordable broadband program, Internet Essentials.
- Or East Madera, a bedroom community of 185 homes, where residents' only internet option is expensive satellite service that is too slow and inconsistent for reliable uploads or downloads. East Madera's main challenge for receiving infrastructure funding from existing federal or state programs is that it does not have schools or businesses to qualify it.
- Residents in Firebaugh, Huron, Orange Cove and many unincorporated areas are also waiting for broadband, with no solutions in sight.

California residents in these rural communities will be left behind if broadband is not made available soon. Businesses will go elsewhere. Real estate values will fall. Populations will shrink. And people will not connect to the skills, education, services and opportunities that broadband affords.

So on behalf of the unconnected residents of Fresno, Madera and Tulare counties, I say: We cannot wait. Approve the renewal of the California Advanced Services Fund so we can have internet for all.

Shelby Gonzales is the lead staff member from the Office of Community and Economic Development at Fresno State responsible for the management of the San Joaquin Valley Regional Broadband Consortium.