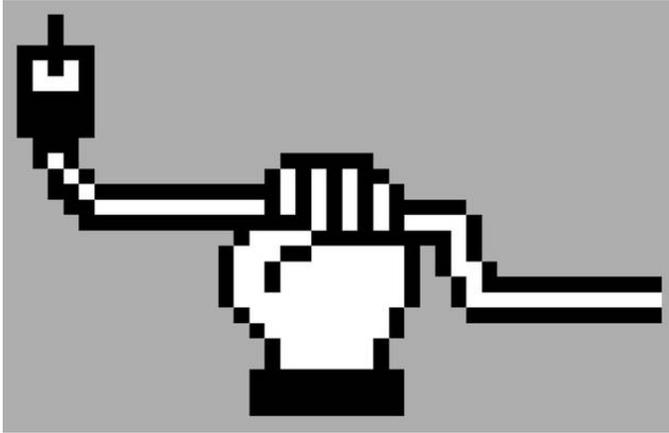


SOAPBOX APRIL 10, 2017 5:00 AM

Bridging the digital divide is imperative for economic prosperity



BY BARBARA O'CONNOR
Special to The Bee

Although California is a powerhouse of technology and innovation, the digital divide persists for rural communities and low-income neighborhoods:

- 30 percent of all households don't have high-speed internet service and a computer at home.
- 43 percent of rural residents don't have reliable high-speed internet access.

OPINION

digital divide.

While the state has made significant progress since 2008 in increasing home broadband use from 55 percent to 84 percent of all households, the sad news is that too many households remain stuck on the wrong side of the

And, the gulf between the “digital haves” and “digital have-nots” is the greatest for the most disadvantaged residents: While 16 percent of the overall population is not connected at home with high-speed internet service, 32 percent of low-income households, 32 percent of Spanish-speaking families, 29 percent of people with disabilities, 37 percent of adults without a high-school diploma and 44 percent of seniors remain unconnected.

Further, higher percentages of disadvantaged residents than the general population are connected at home only with a smartphone. While smartphones are marvelous devices that enable access to an amazing amount of information online, it is difficult for a student to do homework or an adult to acquire workforce skills or apply for a job using only a smartphone.

Those who are connected only with a smartphone are emerging as another distinct segment of the population referred to as the “underconnected” because they have fewer benefits from the full range of digital technologies and less opportunity to contribute to California's economic prosperity.

Residents who are unconnected or underconnected also often are confronted with an interrelated set of factors and forces that constitute a huge barrier to overcome and escape – which we call a “wall of poverty” – resulting in these households being left behind at an accelerating pace in a digital world. They are increasingly disenfranchised from democracy because so much information and so many services are available only online. No economy can thrive with 30 percent of its population shut out from economic opportunities and blocked in reaching their full potential.

These facts are a sobering reminder that the quest to close the digital divide has to be an integral part of a deeper commitment by policymakers and regulators to tackle poverty and empower all Californians. That is why the California Emerging Technology Fund and a wide array of civic leaders and community organizations across the state are supporting the Internet For All Now Act, Assembly Bill 1665, to continue the California Advanced Services Fund to support broadband deployment in unserved and underserved areas, and promote broadband to assist low-income households get online.

The Internet For All Now Act was introduced by Assembly members Eduardo Garcia, Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, Chris Holden and Kevin McCarty, with principal co-authors David Chiu, Susan Talamante Eggman, Kevin Mullin, and co-authors Anna Caballero, Mike Gipson, Reginald Jones-Sawyer, Marc Levine, Jose Medina, Eloise Gomez Reyes, Blanca Rubio and Jim Wood – an impressive list of legislators. Assembly and Senate policy committee Chairmen Miguel Santiago and Ben Hueso recognize the need for action and are encouraging negotiations among stakeholders to reach consensus. These legislators are true trailblazers to ensure California remains economically competitive and a national leader in closing the digital divide.

Given the potential for technology to provide equality in access to information, services and participation in the democracy coupled with its power to transform lives for a better future and accelerate gains in economic prosperity, it is an imperative to close the digital divide for California's future. We urge the Legislature and governor to immediately approve and expeditiously implement the Internet For All Now Act.

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