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Broadband Spread: First the Route, Then the Tech

California's Broadband Council held its first meeting aimed at allowing stakeholders to identify key communications corridors across the state. This will roll into the plan to develop the state's broadband infrastructure, delivering services to 98 percent of households, which is one of the council's legislative goals.

SEP 28 / BY KAYLA NICK-KEARNEY (/AUTHOR/KAYLA-NICK-KEARNEY)

California's Broadband Council has held its first meeting aimed at allowing stakeholders to identify key communications corridors, a move that will roll into the plan to deliver services to 98 percent of households, which is one of the council's legislative goals.

Public agencies like Caltrans and the California Public Utilities Commission met along with industry members like Inyo Networks, Charter, Cox and Comcast.

Ideally, broadband conduit routes align with major highways and thoroughfares, which lets entities dig trenches and roadbeds just once. That's why the stakeholders include transportation authorities as well as broadband providers.

"I always used to remind transportation officials that the best trip is a virtual trip," said Sunne Wright McPeak, president and CEO of the nonprofit California Emerging Technology Fund. In an interview with *Techwire,* she said: *"*From our perspective in transportation and trying to manage the state highway system, if we can unload a trip from the system, it helps everybody and it is a green strategy. Everybody that we would talk to said, 'That is a great strategy; we agree with it.' The real challenge is how do we implement it, and that requires everyone into the same room to have a common conversation.

"The next step in this consultation is to ask what are strategic corridors, what are paths that might include a part of the state transportation network to install conduit at the time of a transportation project, even if at that time an Internet service provider does not know that they want to be in that trench," McPeak said.

Conduit exists along major corridors such as highways 5 and 99, but McPeak said the east-west connection is lacking. She asks private industry, "What are those strategic corridors in California that we need to have access to that we don't have access to today, that basically don't have middle mile?"

Connecting between urban centers would be key for rural areas accessing education, telemedicine and government services. It would also assist in first-responder communication in emergencies such as forest fires.

"The tribal component, especially in California, we are spread out ... and typically in the non-urban areas, which are the connectors," **Matthew Rantanen (https://www.linkedin.com/in/matthewrantanen/)**, director of technology for Southern California Tribal Chairmen's Association, told *Techwire*. "A lot of the strategic things that happen during an emergency are run by tribal folks."

"It's the connecting space within the bigger areas so when there's a poor communications corridor or an unidentified communications corridor or a place where natural disaster happens, typically rides in the tribal communities and those become places of interest during emergencies, and they don't have any connectivity," Rantanen said. "Integrating it into the planning of the state and working on the cohesiveness of those rural communities, as well as the urban city centers and the communication centers, making sure those corridors are identified and supporting rural California is really key."

Another goal of the meeting is to create a public-private partnership that informs all parties of opportunities to place new conduit.

"We're looking at it from the technology side of it as well as the infrastructure of the state, in this case it is the highway system and Dig Once. If we can solicit ideas and be open to ways that the public and private can work together to plan ahead, that's the goal," state CIO Amy Tong told *Techwire* in an interview.

The Dig Once policy focuses on placing all services into a trench when construction is underway, instead of returning to that ditch and adding in later.

"This builds on Assemblymember Jim Wood having authored the Dig Once policy, which is common sense, if we're going to be constructing in a particle corridor, if we're opening up a trench, let's get everybody in it at the same time," McPeak said. "I know that takes a very proactive effort by Caltrans, on behalf of all transportation entities in California to actually reach out, notify utilities, public agencies."

Rantanen and Michael Ort, CEO of Inyo Networks, compared the buildout of broadband to the development of California's highway systems. The system looks similar and will physically line up with broadband infrastructure in many places, Ort said.

"We are coming together and we're thinking about the future and we're thinking about the infrastructure needed to unify California, rural California with urban California," Ort said. "We are a single economy and we need to operate as a single economy. We take for granted information as human beings but what we're doing in the information revolution is we're objectifying it, we're managing it and we're using it in a way that we've never done before. We'll never be able to do that without broadband."

In the future, vendors can spread jobs across the state, Ort said. They can also be involved in developing the broadband infrastructure.

The public-private partnership is necessary because so many public agencies can be involved in laying conduit.

"To build those networks, especially in some of the rural areas, it requires a great deal of coordination with all the public agencies," Ort said. "I think we're at the beginning of a really important dialog."

Public agencies were not always involved in the buildout.

"That's why our network in the United States is not as robust as it should be ... because we relied on those companies to get it done when the objectives weren't completely laid out," Rantanen said. "The understanding has changed in the last 20, 25 years of what broadband is and what telecommunications can do for people, and that it truly is an electricity, a water type of resource."

Ort also said sharing the burden of risk and cost will be important to the development of broadband across the state.

Rantanen echoed that point: "I think that's one of the biggest things that needs to be understood is that, if California is to succeed, everybody can't be paying for this in silos, it all has to be a generalized effort."

Broadband services will bring educational, economic and telemedicine opportunities to rural areas, according to stakeholders.

"One of the things the Bell System learned in the 1930s in its development of information theory, was that the more people that were connected on the network, the more value the network had for everybody else," Ort said. "The same thing holds today with broadband. But more than that, the more applications we develop that use networks to exchange information, to develop big data, cognitive computing, AI, all of these intersect together, into basically a single system."

The impact does not stop there, Tong said.

"When it comes to broadband initiative, there's never enough attention about how impactful it is, especially to the underserved communities. So today's convening of all of the stakeholders from industry and from governmental entities such as CalTrans and California Transportation Committee and all of us, representing the Broadband Council, is really a way of demonstrating the public and private partnership so we can figure out ways to accelerate providing broadband access," Tong said.

By Kayla Nick-Kearney (/kayla-nick-kearney.html)
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