

Broadband access better, work still needed

Jessie Faulkner/The Times-Standard

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EUREKA -- The Board of Supervisors heard a report Tuesday indicting North Coast broadband access has improved markedly in recent years, but more work is necessary to blanket that quick service throughout the area.

Redwood Coast Connect members Tina Nerat and Connie Stewart provided a snapshot of their seven months of research profiling that access, and speaking with community members.

"We've got a number of unserved towns," Nerat said, "but that number is getting smaller."

Much of that improvement has come with the introduction of wireless high-speed Internet access, she said.

Yet there remain a number of communities showing a high demand for high-speed Internet access including Arcata, Blue Lake, Briceland, Bridgeville, Fieldbrook, Fortuna, Hoopa, Miranda, Orleans, Redway, Weott, Whitethorn and Willow Creek, Nerat said.

One of the potential stumbling blocks is that while the communities have shown a desire for the service, the Internet service providers desire to extend broadband access has not been as energetic.

Nerat said that discussions have been underway for at least five years about the need to establish a backup system for high-speed Internet access, which is not only needed for the North Coast's

larger communities, but also in the more rural communities with broadband, such as Hoopa.

At present, she said, discussions are underway with five Internet service providers to establish redundant links, but the details of those negotiations are not yet public.

Nerat did ask the county to ease the permit process for those involved in installing the equipment necessary for redundant broadband.

One provider in the Big Lagoon area, she said, has been waiting seven years for the required permits.

"We've got to make sure we don't create that problem," she said.

One possibility -- currently pending the governor's signature -- is the ability of community service districts to take on an additional role as an Internet service provider.

Fifth District Supervisor Jill Geist, saying that displayed maps of broadband access north of Trinidad appeared to be "naked," said that the Orick Community Services District had discussed that possibility, but was hesitant to do so given its ongoing work toward building a wastewater treatment plant.

Redwood Coast Connect's data will be posted on its Web site, redwoodcoastconnect.humboldt.edu, next week for community feedback. In the future, a final report on the research will be presented to the board.

The one-year pilot project is possible through \$250,000 from the California Emerging Technology Fund and \$500,000 from the Humboldt Area Foundation and the Mel and Grace McLean Foundation.

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