

Time to connect all Californians to the Internet

ONE OF the smartest strategies California can embrace to spur economic recovery and enhance the state's global competitiveness is to get all residents connected through broadband — high-speed access to the Internet — at home, school, work and in all public places.

Indeed, the ability to be “connected” instantly through the Internet to information, services and digital tools is increasingly critical for access to, and success in, education, jobs, and economic opportunity. High-speed Internet networks have become essential 21st century infrastructure, as vital to commerce and quality of life as the transportation system was to the last century.

Yet, while California is home to a wellspring of innovation that gave rise to the evolution of broadband and information technology, the use by Californians is only on par with the national average — at 55 percent of all households subscribing to broadband and 75 percent having a computer at home.

More challenging, these statistics vary widely by income, English proficiency and other socio-economic factors. For example, only 33 percent of households under \$40,000 annual income, and 34 percent of Latino households, have broadband access at home, while use by upper-income English-speaking households exceeds 90 percent.

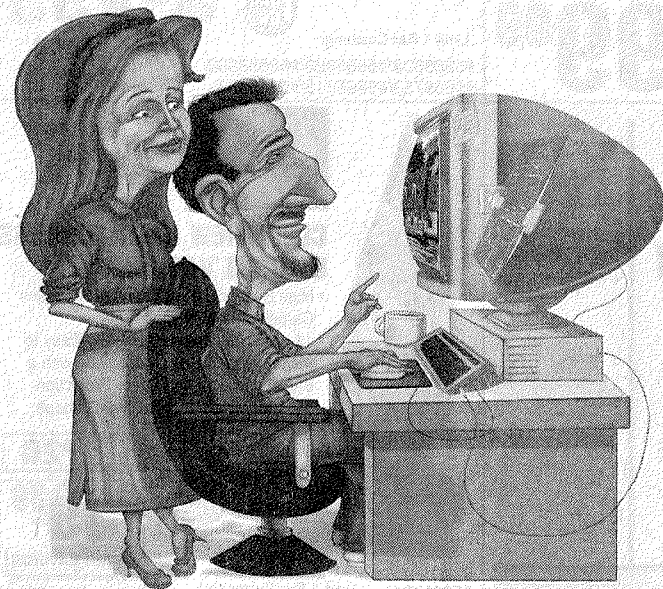
In fact, there are more than 10 million Californians without a computer at home and more than 16 million without a broadband connection at home. And, although broadband infrastructure is available to 96 percent of California households, the approximately 500,000 households without access in rural and remote areas are spread out over 44,000 square miles.

This differential in access to and adoption of broadband technology among subgroups of the population is referred to as the Digital Divide, which is actually another facet of “economic divide” for too many Californians. Such a gap is unacceptable if

California is to reach its full potential for prosperity, create productivity gains that stimulate new investment and jobs, and achieve many of the additional benefits high-speed Internet access can provide.

Fortunately, the opportunity for California to “get smart” by “getting connected” is within immediate grasp. Billions of dollars in infrastructure bonds approved by California voters, an expected infusion of federal stimulus money, and a fund created by the California Public Utilities Commission to extend broadband services can all help spur access. This week, an unprecedented multilingual public awareness program was launched in California (and online at www.getconnectedtoday.com) to break down the barriers to broadband adoption and help all residents get connected.

California must commit to achieve ubiquitous broadband and adopt an official policy to promote digital literacy. All school children must have access to comput-



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ers connected to broadband. Every public agency must facilitate the deployment of broadband and build the technology into every infrastructure construction project. All Californians deserve no less.

McPeak, former secretary of the state Business, Transportation and Housing Agency,

is president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, established pursuant to the orders of the California Public Utilities Commission in approving the mergers of SBC-AT&T and Verizon-MCI in 2005. CETF is an independent, public-purpose nonprofit with a mission to close the Digital Divide in California.