

A Virtual Necessity

Hooking up all Californians with broadband access to Web must be a priority for state and local leaders.

By **SUNNE WRIGHT McPEAK**

UNION Bank sees its value in expanding the pool of customers who bank online.

The Little Tokyo Service Center in Los Angeles sees its benefit in providing seniors with a pathway to preserve community stories and immigrant experiences on video posts to YouTube, and in enabling partnerships that support small business with e-commerce tools.

California State University sees its usefulness in making learning programs more accessible to the disabled.

The "it" is broadband, delivered through cable, phone lines or wireless, and its value proposition is defined in many ways. 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 and jobs, and economic opportunity. High-speed Internet networks are essential 21st century infrastructure – as vital to commerce, economic competitiveness and quality of life as the transportation system was to the last century. In addition, broadband is a "green technology" that can significantly reduce impacts on the environment by offsetting vehicle trips, decreasing the use of resources and saving energy.

Yet, while California is home to a wellspring of innovation that has given rise to the evolution of broadband and information technology, the use by Californians as a whole 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 socioeconomic factors. For example, only one in three 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 – more than the population of Illinois. And, although broadband infrastructure is available to 96 per-

cent of California households, the 4 percent (or approximately 500,000 households and 1.4 million people) without access in rural and remote areas are spread out over 44,000 square miles – equal to the size of Kentucky.

'Digital divide'

This differential in access to and adoption of broadband technology among subgroups of the population is referred to as the "digital divide," which in reality is actually another facet of "economic divide" for too many Californians. Such a gap is unacceptable if Southern California and the rest of the state are to reach its full potential for prosperity, create productivity gains that stimulate new investment and jobs, and to achieve many of the additional benefits high-speed Internet access can provide.

Imagine the ability to access your health records remotely and have your medical conditions monitored at home.

Imagine every student being able to have a computer and broadband connection at home to better learn and do their homework with their parents able to follow their progress at school.

Imagine all public services – from getting your vehicle registration to renewing your pet's license to taking an education course to upgrade your job skills – being available with the touch of a key from your computer or mobile PDA.

Fortunately, the opportunity for California to "get smart" by "getting connected" is well within our grasp.

California voters have approved billions in infrastructure bonds, the federal government has approved economic stimulus funds, and the California Public Utilities Commission has established a fund to help extend broadband into unserved and underserved communities. California must now commit to achieve ubiquitous broadband and adopt an official policy to promote digital literacy.

On May 22, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed an executive order setting a framework for a digital literacy policy that may well be modeled at a national level by President Obama's future digital czar. And just this month, an important statewide public education and awareness effort to boost broadband connectivity launched in East Los Angeles and on the Web at GetConnectedToday.com. Supported by industry and business partners, the Get Connected! program includes community fairs, a new Web portal, outreach and advertising, and is designed to reduce the barriers to adoption and access, which in some cases includes a simple fear or misunderstanding of the technology.



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Through these efforts, all school children must have access to computers connected to broadband and be equipped with the skills to maximize their use for learning. Every public agency at the local, regional, state and federal levels must facilitate the deployment of broadband and build the technology into every infrastructure construction project. And consumers, no matter where they live or work, must have the access to broadband to unlock economic opportunity for themselves, for business and for our state.

All Californians deserve no less.

Sunne Wright McPeak is president and chief executive of the California Emerging Technology Fund, an independent, public-purpose non-profit whose mission is to close the digital divide in California. It is based in Los Angeles and San Francisco.