# All deserve access to broadband

By Sunne Wright McPeak

Updated: 06/30/2009 05:04:14 PM PDT

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.

The "it" is broadband, delivered through cable, phone lines or wireless. Indeed, the ability to be "connected" instantly through the Internet is increasingly critical for access to and success in education, jobs and economic opportunity.

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 - 55 percent of all households subscribe to broadband and 75 percent have a computer at home.

More challenging, these statistics vary widely by income, English-proficiency, and other socio-economic factors. For example, only one in three households under $40,000 annual income and 34 percent of Latino households have broadband access, 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.

This differential in access to and adoption of broadband technology among sub-groups of the population is referred to as the Digital Divide. 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 to achieve many of the additional benefits high-speed Internet access can provide.

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 on June 11, an important

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statewide public education and awareness effort launched at www.getconnectedtoday.com. Supported by industry and business partners, the Get Connected! program is designed to reduce the barriers to adoption and access, which is some cases includes a simple fear or misunderstanding of the technology.

All school children must have access to computers connected to broadband. 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.

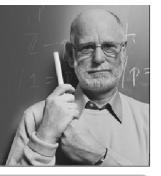All Californians deserve no less.

Sunne Wright McPeak 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.