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Riverbank wins \$1.5M in onramps to digital superhighway

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RIVERBANK — Free Internet access, high-tech training for youth and low-cost computers are headed to Riverbank, thanks to a new program meant to bridge the city's digital divide.

Riverbank recently was selected — along with communities near San Diego and Los Angeles — to participate in a \$1.5 million statewide initiative called Bring IT Home.

The program aims to open digital doors for Riverbank residents, some of whom are cut off from high-tech resources. Households in the Northern San Joaquin Valley are less likely than other parts of the state to have computers and Internet access.

Latinos, people who are less-educated and immigrants lag even further behind, according to a recent study by the Public Policy Institute of California. Riverbank was selected to participate in the Bring IT Home program in part because of its high poverty rate and high unemployment, said Cris Arzate, director of Bring IT Home California.

"Hopefully they'll ride the wave into the 21st century more easily," Arzate said. "A seasonal job in the fields could become a permanent job as a computer technician."

The Bring IT Home program will attack Riverbank's digital divide on four fronts:

- **Youth training.** Young people ages 16 to 21 will be trained to serve as "Digital Connectors." The bilingual youth will learn basic computer, software and Internet skills. Then they'll pass on their knowledge to seniors and others who need high-tech help.

The town of Pixley, population 2,085, in Tulare County started a Digital Connector program last year. It's been a success, Pixley Connect coordinator Maria Velasquez said. The Pixley Chamber of Commerce recently asked the Digital Connectors for help with its Web site; residents with computer problems seek help from the Digital Connectors. Velasquez said the training helped the young people become more polished and improved their speaking skills. She believes the experience helped some of the Digital Connectors get into four-year universities such as the University of California at Merced and Fresno State University.

"It's just been a very positive reception from the community," Velasquez said. "It's valued by not only youth, but by businesses and adults."

- **Internet access.** As many as 1,000 low-income households will be wired with broadband Internet access. The service will be free for two years. Users will pay part of the cost for one year after that, then the full cost if they want to keep the service.

The Riverbank Housing Authority's 90 low-income apartments will get the Internet access first, perhaps later this fall, Economic Development Director Tim Ogden said. Then the city will take applications from residents. Only residents who meet certain requirements, such as low-income levels, will be eligible for the service.

- **Local online content.** Bring IT Home will create a Web site to inform the public about local resources, such as where to look for jobs or find health care.



From left, Corima Romo, 18, Israel Hernandez, 17, and Jessica Garcia, 17, members of the Digital Connectors, have their survey on computer use filled out by computer hardware specialist, Mark Cupples at the farmers market, Wednesday, August 26, 2009. (DEBBIE NODA/ dnoda@modbee.com) - Modesto Bee - Debbie Noda

• **Low-cost computers.** Through a partnership with Best Buy, Bring IT Home will provide refurbished computers for about \$250 to \$350. Like the Internet access, the computers will go to residents who meet certain requirements. "Even if it's just one more person in Riverbank that now has a computer and training on how to use it, they now can do better job searching, better résumé formatting," Ogden said. "Those of us who use technology so frequently take it for granted. They're going to see how beneficial it is."

The Bring IT Home program is funded by One Economy Corp., a nonprofit that provides technology access to low-income people, and the California Emerging Technology Fund, a nonprofit formed after the mergers of AT&T, SBC, Verizon and MCI. As a condition of the mergers, the companies are required to invest \$60 million over five years to improve high-speed Internet access.

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