

Biz Bits: Figuring out Internet needs in California's north

By LAURA URSENY - Business Editor

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The timing couldn't be more perfect.

That's how CATHY EMERSON is thinking about her NORTHEASTERN CALIFORNIA CONNECT research project on broadband.

Emerson's assignment is feeling out consumers' opinions in a 12-county region about broadband. It's her job to determine access and availability, and maybe suggest what might come next.

Basically, Emerson's project is trying to figure out current service and future demand for high-speed Internet or wireless in some of Northern California's most rural reaches, as well as communities.

Funding for her project comes through the California Emerging Technology Fund and the Redding-based McConnell Foundation.

This research had roots from several years ago, but now there's the more immediate discussion prompted by stimulus funding for broadband projects.

Under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, \$7.2 billion has been set aside for broadband infrastructure work — that is, expanding high-speed Internet to places it isn't or isn't good. Of that amount, \$2.5 billion is tagged for rural areas.

The challenge for Emerson is to identify methods to improve broadband access in unserved and underserved regions, and you can bet there are plenty of those in the north state.

First, a phone survey of 4,200 people was done through the Center for Economic Development at Chico State University.

Emerson has also been working with Internet service providers within Northern California to gauge current service.

Emerson's on the road a lot now as she interviews public officials about their community and area needs. Her report is expected to be finished by March, and hopefully this area will land some of the \$2.5 billion in making it work.

What I found interesting in talking with Emerson last week was some of the response from the phone interviews, including resistance to getting Internet service.

"Not everyone sees the benefit," she admitted.

Another interesting fact is the percentage of businesses already with broadband. In the 12-county area, Colusa, Yuba and Plumas counties have the most businesses with high-speed Internet. Butte, Glenn, Shasta and Lassen counties are in the middle. Siskiyou, Tehama, Lake, Modoc and Sutter counties have the least.

Household service, however, is different, with Butte, Shasta, Lassen and Sutter having the most. Tehama, Glenn, Modoc and Colusa are in the middle, and Plumas, Yuba, Lake and Siskiyou have the least.

California is among the first states to receive state broadband mapping grants, with the money being funneled through the California Public Utilities Commission to Chico State University.

Congress wants to know the state of broadband availability before investing more.

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Businesses that have thought about doing business with the government or utilities might want to take advantage of a "matchmaking fair" slated for Oct. 22 in Chico.

The CALIFORNIA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION is organizing a workshop from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Manzanita Place, 1705 Manzanita Ave.

Its purpose is to put businesses and contract-writers face to face.

Procurement representatives from Caltrans, state Department of General Services, Water Resources, and the CPUC will be on scene with utilities like PG&E, AT&T, Comcast and others.

Registration starts at 7 a.m., with presentations beginning at 8 a.m. and "matchmaking" from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. There is no charge for the event.

And just an aside to that, the U.S. Small Business Administration has free online training for entrepreneurs on winning federal contracts.

The information is at www.sba.gov/fedcontractingtraining.

I'm thinking there could be crossovers with state contracts, and there's a section on women entrepreneurs shooting for federal contracts.

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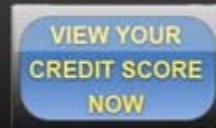
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