

High-speed Internet use, need varies

By LAURA URSENY-Staff Writer

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CHICO — Rural pockets of Northern California are not hot-beds of Internet use, nor do they want to be, according to a federally funded study recently released.

A surprising number of respondents to a survey are sure they can live without the Internet, and aren't very interested in enhancing broadband service, especially if they have to pay for it.

On the other hand, those communities that have Internet access don't know what they'd do without it. Users say they find information on health care and personal safety, and pursue distance learning, as well as buying goods and communicating with friends and family.

Telemedicine that connects patients and medical staffs via the Internet is a huge benefit, rural residents told questioners.

A telephone survey and personal follow-up through the Center for Economic Development at Chico State University questioned businesses, residents and government officials in 12 Northern California counties. The study included calls to about 4,200 individuals.

According to project manager Cathy Emerson, 15 percent to 17 percent of survey respondents said they do not use the Internet, which she said is

higher than the national average.

"This is a lifestyle choice," said Emerson, by way of explanation.

But those who do have the service feel they can't do without it.

In the 12-county area, Colusa, Yuba and Plumas counties have the most businesses with 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.

Because such a high percentage of residents are not clamoring for the service, Internet service providers would not likely be anxious to enter rural areas, which are more difficult to serve, said Emerson.

Of nonuse response, Emerson said, "They don't use it. They don't want it."

But Emerson believes the demand for broadband in the rural north is stronger than what her study shows, and that not everyone has been heard.

"We have to be respectful of the lifestyle choice of those who say thanks, but no thanks."

Respondents said they preferred to communicate face-to-face or by phone, rather than by e-mail, she said.

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With that information in hand, another study is about to begin that focuses on the Chico and Redding areas, she said, which are likely more active and supportive.

Emerson noted Internet servers in Northern California include Comcast, AT&T, DigitalPath and Clearwire, yet there are pockets where service is not available.

"People don't want to pay more for (getting) the service," said Emerson.

Additionally, municipal and county government officials interviewed by Emerson in areas where Internet wasn't readily available or lightly used said they weren't willing to take on a campaign to expand service because their constituents weren't that interested and the infrastructure costs were high.

"It's not a priority to them," Emerson said officials told her.

Nevertheless, turning the spotlight on broadband has been constructive to Northern California, she said.

"This really pushed the conversation into the public spotlight. It's raised the consciousness of what broadband is and what it can do."

A "high number" of people are happy with their Internet service and didn't want to pay for anything more, she said.

"Communities need to become involved in a proactive role supporting Internet service providers."

Citing the recent surge of interest in the "Google:

Fiber for Communities" initiative, there seems to be more interest in "doing it locally," she noted.

Chico is among the communities that applied for the Google competition of getting extremely high-speed broadband. But also out of the Google effort has come interest in exploring how communities can bring high-speed broadband themselves.

"People here want it to happen and the conversation is happening," Emerson said.

To expand broadband service in Northern California, Emerson said two factors are key: "Broadband subscriptions need to increase, and communities need to take a proactive role in supporting, encouraging and driving the process. That will result in better infrastructure being designed, installed and deployed."

Expanding broadband has been a federal and California initiative, with funding coming through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act that set aside \$2.5 billion for studying rural areas like Northern California.

Funding for the Northern California study came through the California Emerging Technology Fund and the Redding-based McConnell Foundation.

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