

Closing the digital divide

Mary Anderson, Redwood Times

Posted: 10/06/2010 02:23:43 PM PDT

The 2010 Redwood Coast Broadband Forum attracted close to 100 participants to the River Lodge in Fortuna on Wednesday, Sept. 29, for a daylong discussion and update on the state of broadband and digital technology on the North Coast.

The forum was sponsored by the Redwood Technology Consortium (RTC), Redwood Coast Rural Action, Redwood Region Economic Development Commission (RREDC) and the California Center for Rural Policy (CCRP). Rollin Richmond, the president of Humboldt State University, opened the proceedings and Connie Stewart, Executive Director of CCRP was the moderator.

The morning began with presentations from Jon Dickinson, Deputy Director of External Affairs for the State Chief Information Officer; Susan Walters, Senior Vice President of the California Emerging Technologies Fund (CETF), and Jack Leutza, Director of the Communications Division of the Public Utilities Commission (PUC).

Susan Walters said that about 12 percent of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds were directed into emerging technologies. The goal of her organization is to bring broadband Internet to 70 percent of California by 2015. Progress towards this goal will be measured in terms of the number of people subscribing to broadband connections.

"To close the digital divide in the nation," she said, "we have to close it here in California."

As part of the strategy to reach their goal, CETF is pushing all counties in California to adopt a Get Connected policy. All counties on the North Coast, from Del Norte to Sonoma have already put their connectivity policy in place, but about half of the state's counties have not.

"We are committed to making sure that every single person is connected," Stewart said.

Stewart drew everyone's attention to the copy of the Telecommunications Element in the Humboldt County General Plan Update. She reiterated remarks she has made during the discussions about the Telecommunication document opposing any built-in restrictions in the plan on siting of towers and broadband connections. She said that the group hoped to prevent "anything that would restrict wireless connections" and she decried what she called "the fear of wireless."

"We have a long way to go to convince people it's a safe technology," she said.

Stewart noted that Verizon and AT&T had been invited to the conference, but they didn't come. The best outcomes in terms of connectivity are reached when small communities come together, she said, because "we can't get the big guys to come to the table."

One of the big guys, AT&T, has laid a fiber optic cable along U.S. 101, but this has not resulted in broadband connections for towns along that freeway. Barbara Kennedy was at the forum, representing the Weott Community Services District, which would like to have a fiber connection in town but hasn't been able to get AT&T to discuss the matter. She asked Jack Leutza if the PUC could bring any influence to bear on AT&T.

Leutza said that the PUC doesn't regulate Verizon or



We focus on automating Marriott® Hotels' global invoice process. So they don't have to.

Learn more at RealBusiness.com

Ready For Real Business **xerox**

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

AT&T, but that if the CSD and town residents contacted them, they could set up an investigation and bring some influence to bear on opening up the fiber line to the town.

Stewart said that she thought the reason AT&T wasn't interested in bringing a fiber connection to Weott because twice "yahoos with backhoes in Weott broke the line."

Tina Nerat of the RTC said that Weott presented a challenge for wireless connections because it is surrounded by State Parks. She said that the parks are decommissioning old roads and converting them to trails and that means that contractors can't get in to build towers. She said that same problem exists in Richardson Grove.

Leutza said that large providers are not attracted to rural areas because they don't believe there will be enough return on their investment. The standard accounting practices for providing the service is to divide the cost of providing the service by the number of customers and this makes rural areas unattractive to for-profit companies.

Paul Romero of the Yurok Tribe said that a broadband grant will make it possible for them to get coverage from Klamath to Weitchpec. They will be starting construction of two towers and will be working with Carlson Wireless utilizing TV white space that is low frequency and able to penetrate forests. He said they see that wireless connection as temporary. The ultimate goal is to have fiber Internet connections throughout the reservation.

A good portion of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds have been directed at schools. The Los Angeles School District was awarded over \$7.5 million to bring broadband connections to 49 middle schools. Close to \$11 million went to community colleges in the Central

Valley region.

Southern Humboldt Unified School District Superintendent Michael McAllister said he came to the conference to find out what was happening throughout the county as part of his goal to provide Internet services to the schools within the district.

"I'm still working with the County Office of Education," McAllister said, "to upgrade the system that we are currently utilizing. It's entirely inadequate for education to have dial-up at our schools or limited and unreliable access. We have bottleneaking problems where the amount of data that can be transferred is limited. When 30 kids are working at the computer lab at the same time downloading or uploading information, the system becomes overloaded and a bottleneck slows everything down and the kids get frustrated because they're forced to sit and wait. We need them to be able to move forward quickly."

South Fork has the best connection, with a T1 line but they would like to have access to a major fiber optic line. He said he had hoped to connect with the "power players" in regard to the fiber line, but, of course, AT&T wasn't at the forum.

McAllister said he was disappointed by that.

"We'd like them to understand that we can't provide a high quality education to our kids without their hardware," he said. "And it has to be cost effective for us to do it. To say they'll provide us with the opportunity, but then pricing us out of the market isn't acceptable either."

McAllister said the district continues to look for grants and is hoping to partner with other organizations because the district doesn't have the technological infrastructure to directly provide the service. They're hoping to join forces with other



Save \$26 a month
and lock in your price for ONE YEAR!
Switch today! 1-877-866-8603

agencies also in search of broadband connections.

In other words, it will take connections to achieve connectivity.

**Eat Great,
Lose Weight!**



Call **1-888-378-3151**
and get a **FREE** week of meals plus
a **BONUS \$25 gift!**

eDiets
**fresh
prepared**
meal delivery

Rated #1 best-tasting
by epicurious.com
"Best bang for your buck!"
- Redbook

© 2009 eDiets.com, Inc. All rights reserved. epicurious is a TM of Conde Nast Digital. Redbook is a TM of Hearst Communication, Inc.