



The Future Depends on More Digital Access

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By Christine Kehoe and Sunne Wright McPeak |

The number of Californians with home broadband connections to the Internet is growing. That's good news for our state.

High-speed Internet connections have increased 31 percent between 2008 and 2011 among California households, even amid the economic downturn. Among Latinos, the rate has grown a stunning 60 percent. Once in the middle of the pack, California now has among the highest home broadband adoption rates in the nation.

It's an example of the positive change that can come when public officials set their mind to making a difference, in this case providing millions of Californians the technology tools to reach their potential and making measurable progress to close the digital divide.

The California Public Utilities Commission, the nonprofit California Emerging Technology Fund established by the commission in 2005, and the California Broadband Council, in partnership with the California Legislature and Administration, federal government, foundations, and corporations, are committed to a goal of 80 percent broadband adoption statewide by 2015, and 90 percent by 2020. As of last summer, California is at 72 percent, 10 percentage points above the U.S. adoption rate. For those who think the digital divide is all but closed, the fact remains that home broadband adoption rates for Californians earning under \$40,000 hover below 60 percent.

That must change if California and San Diego want to sustain their places as the innovation engines for the kinds of advancements that improve all of our lives. Rather than celebrating our accomplishments, it's time to redouble our efforts.

Next week the Board of Directors of [the California Emerging Technology Fund](#) are meeting in San Diego to put the final touches on the next phase of the plan to integrate affordable high-speed Internet connections into neighborhood transformation projects, and target populations that remain underserved. Those include people with limited English proficiency, veterans, poor inner-city residents, seniors and people with disabilities.

The nonprofit San Diego Futures Foundation, a partner of the California Emerging Technology Fund, has developed a model ecosystem for incorporating digital literacy and technology workforce training into its program of providing low-priced computers and affordable broadband connections. San Diego County government computers, for example, are refurbished, and often the work is done by graduates of the workforce training program. The computers go to households that otherwise could not afford one and local nonprofits. And many of the graduates go to work for the foundation's help center, providing training and technical assistance to the community.

Computers, fiber lines and wireless spectrum, of course, are only part of the equation. We need to build effective training programs so students, parents, workers at the entry level or seeking career changes, and seniors can take full advantage of the digital age. Last September, with the help of U.S. Department of Commerce grants administered by the California Emerging Technology Fund, the San Diego Futures Foundation opened the Community Technology Center in City Heights, where any San Diego County resident is eligible to take computer classes. Find out [more information here](#).

With support from the state Legislature, earlier this year the San Diego Imperial Regional Broadband Consortium received its first funding. The consortium is taking an integrated approach, focusing on technology programs to promote education, health and safety, and economic development. Find out [more here](#).

We've come far, but there is still much work to be done. We invite San Diegans to join us in helping all of San Diego and Imperial Counties to get connected. Our future depends on it.

Christine Kehoe is a state Senator and Sunne Wright McPeak is the president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund.

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