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Computer lab truck hits Internet highway
Project hopes to narrow information gap for farmworkers, others

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TechMobile project engineer Jim Newsom discusses the high-tech work in progress Tuesday at the Monterey County Office of Education in Salinas. / The Salinas Californian

Written by
Andy Stiny

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Say you are a recent arrival in the Salinas Valley from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Maybe you work in the fields and you need to find out about getting DMV or other services — all on the Web, right?

For those lacking computer and Web skills, the so-called Internet Divide can be daunting.

But help exists and will be rolled out next month when a mobile digital classroom called the TechMobile travels around the Salinas Valley. It's to help the underserved in rural areas gain Internet skills that many take for granted.

It's part of Community Connection, a program of the Central Coast Broadband Consortium Public Computing Alliance, and is funded from a $3.9 million federal grant from the Broadband Technologies Opportunities Program (BTOP) under the U.S. Department of Commerce, said Arlene Krebs, director of Wireless Education and Technology at Californian State University, Monterey Bay.

CSUMB is one of seven partners in the consortium which includes the Monterey County Office of Education, Hartnell College, Monterey County Free Libraries, Boys and Girls Clubs for Monterey County, the Community Information Center and the National Steinbeck Center.

The county Board of Supervisors put its stamp of approval on Internet literacy when they approved a resolution Tuesday to join a program called Get Connected, a statewide effort by the California Emerging Technology Fund.

The resolution is meant to ensure that "no matter how much money you have or where you live ... that all people have access to high-speed Internet and have access to digital literacy training," said Krebs, speaking before Tuesday's meeting began.

In addition to its TechMobile, Community Connection "has established 30 public computing centers where low-income individuals and families can have assess to the Internet," Krebs said.

The centers offer classes to all ages in basic computer and Internet skills, word processing, photo editing and more. The classes are offered in English, Spanish and some indigenous Oaxacan languages.

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The 65-foot, TechMobile diesel truck and trailer will have 23 state-of-the-art computing stations, said Hamish Tyler, who as executive director of the MCOE's Media Center for Art, Education and Technology, is overseeing the refitting of the truck. The cost of the vehicle and the re-fit is about $500,000, he said.

"There is a huge need in our county," said Tyler of the TechMobile. The truck/trailer will go to labor camps, schools and other places, particularly in south county including Greenfield, King City and as far south as San Ardo.

"Where the people are, the truck will go," Tyler said.

The mobile computer lab is meant to "blend" traditional school instruction with computer skills, Tyler said.

Several years ago, three south county school districts were rated academically low statewide, he said. Teachers and parents can also receive computer training to pass on the knowledge to children. The idea is "to get our underserved youngsters up to grade level at least," Tyler said.

The board of supervisors wants to know "about the impact of computer technology and Internet access on individuals and families," Tuesday's resolution said. The board is asking organizations to briefly report in six months on "strategic actions" that have removed barriers to Internet access.

The California Emerging Technology Fund that the board joined Tuesday, is a non-profit corporation established by the California Public Utilities Commission when it approved the AT & T and Verizon-MCI merger in 2005. Those companies were required to give $60 million to the Fund over five years "for the purpose of achieving ubiquitous access to broadband and advanced services in California, particularly in under-served communities, through the use of emerging technologies by 2010," states the Fund website.

The goal of the Get Connected statewide effort, spearheaded by former Gov. Arnold Swartzenegger, is that by 2015 "80 percent of our state households will have access to broadband (Internet) through multiple technologies" both wired and wireless, Krebs