

## **New towers provide free Internet connections in poorer Richmond neighborhoods**

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RICHMOND -- Yolanda Lopez stood in front of her ranch-style home, beaming a smile thanks to the Internet connection tower mounted on her roof.

"All my neighbors are coming up and thanking me for the free Internet," Lopez said in Spanish. "A lot of people can't pay \$50 per month."

Lopez's house is one of two pilot locations for a grant-funded program to expand free high-speed Internet signals to about 400 houses in the city's low-income Iron Triangle neighborhood. The free service is made possible by Building Blocks for Kids (BBK), a collaborative of about 30 government agencies, nonprofit groups and local leaders, and funded by a \$500,000 grant from the California Emerging Technology Fund aimed at increasing digital literacy in the Internet-starved areas of Richmond.

The Internet tower installed on Lopez's house receives signals from Internet Archive, a nonprofit organization that has a 40-foot tower at 2512 Florida Ave. Lopez's transmitter sends free Internet signals for a radius of a few hundred yards, providing the web to dozens of neighbors, said Internet Archive engineer Ralf Muehlen.

The ongoing costs to provide the signal, now that the hardware is in place, is "negligible," Muehlen said.

By summer, BBK partners hope to outfit 20 houses in the Iron Triangle with signal towers, providing free high-speed Internet signals to more than 400 homes, said BBK Executive Director Jennifer Lyle. A second tower has already been installed at a home in Atchison Village, Lyle said.

The installations are part of a multiyear effort to increase Internet connectivity in Richmond.

Last year, a BBK working group surveyed nearly 500 Richmond residents about their technology needs. According to a new 58-page study BBK released titled "Community Connections: A Road Map for Advancing Digital Literacy and Access in Richmond's Iron Triangle," one-third of local residents do not have access to the Internet at home and 40 percent do not own a working computer.

"The report reflects what we've known about our residents," Lyle said. "The cost of getting Internet is too prohibitive for our families."

Also funded by the grant, BBK has provided more than 900 families with Internet training and distributed about 1,000 free computers refurbished by ReliaTech, a local nonprofit, Lyle said.

The city's Information Technology and Library departments are among BBK's partners, and played a role in engineering the Internet hardware.

Mayor Gayle McLaughlin also visited Lopez's house Tuesday, praising the collaborative for helping link more residents to the web, which she said will enhance education and connectivity to local city services.

"Together we are going to show that Richmond is a high-tech city," McLaughlin said.

Earlier Tuesday, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors expressed interest in expanding the free Internet countywide as part of efforts to bridge the digital divide and help cut poverty in half by 2020, said Terrance Cheung, Supervisor John Gioia's chief of staff.