

Must make investment to make East Bay better connected

By Keith Carson, Oakland Tribune My Word © 2014 Bay Area News Group

The Bay Area is a leader in the technology sectors that help to drive U.S. economic growth. Businesses from small startups to large international corporations call this region home because of a highly educated workforce, stellar universities, three national labs and a thriving cultural scene.

Against this backdrop, our region must differentiate itself to stay competitive. Infrastructure investments matter to attract and retain companies, and we must prioritize one infrastructure to remain on the cutting edge -- broadband, otherwise known as high-speed Internet.

Every person who uses video teleconferencing or needs reliable cell phone coverage understands why broadband is important. It is essential for attracting and retaining innovative businesses and growing our economy.

A recent analysis by Tellus Venture of the East Bay's broadband coverage gave the region a C grade. Experts further project that increased high-speed Internet usage will put a strain on our current infrastructure if we don't take steps to upgrade our current systems and increase access to all residents and businesses.

As chair of the East Bay Economic Development Alliance, an organization that focuses on supporting businesses and creating jobs in the region, I know a passing grade is not good enough. We must do better.

That's why I am working with the East Bay Broadband Consortium, comprised of more than 80 organizations, to develop strategies that strengthen our broadband infrastructure.

The consortium is gathering information, identifying parts of the region that require the most support and advancing best practices to promote broadband adoption. The consortium also convenes conversations on broadband solutions for the East Bay through symposia such as the "Get Fast" Summit 8:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. Wednesday at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center.

Already, local cities are adopting innovative broadband solutions. In San Leandro, private industry and the city joined to launch Lit San Leandro, which uses underground broadband fibers to deliver high-speed Internet to businesses. Through this program, the city is positioned to be a major player in high-tech and cleantech economies.

With support from the California Emerging Technology Fund, the consortium is also bridging the digital divide so everyone in the East Bay can access the Internet and be fully engaged in the digital economy.

Through programs such as East Bay Connects!, my office is partnering with community-based organizations, churches and local leaders in West Oakland to help residents and local businesses gain access to free or low-cost computers, high-speed Internet and high quality training and tech support.

Without access to high-speed Internet, low-income communities are excluded from the 21st century economy.

For example, I recently met a talented entrepreneur who builds motorized bikes in Oakland. The biggest barrier to expansion was a lack of high-speed Internet access to power his website, communications, and e-commerce.

By connecting entrepreneurs like this to the existing broadband infrastructure and by helping them take full advantage of technology, we can create jobs and make an impact on communities affected by generations of poverty.

I believe we can build a responsive, high-quality and cost-effective broadband infrastructure that is inclusive and allows the region to remain competitive in the 21st century economy. When we succeed, we will improve how our regional companies and entrepreneurs do business and provide them with tools to create jobs and grow here in the East Bay.

Visit www.ebbroadband.org for more information about the East Bay Broadband Consortium.

Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson represents the Fifth District, which includes Albany, Berkeley, Emeryville, Piedmont and parts of Oakland. Call 510-272-6695 for more information or visit www.acgov.org/board/district5