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Sunne McPeak, center, resident and chief executive officer of the California Emerging Technology Fund, spoke Tuesday at the Humboldt Bay Aquatic Center in Eureka. She announced a \$500,000 initiative to study broadband infrastructure in four North Coast counties. She appeared with Humboldt State University President Rollin Richmond, left, and Peter Pennekamp, executive director of the Humboldt Area Foundation. Tyson Ritter/The Eureka Reporter

## A big day for broadband

by Steve Spain, The Eureka Reporter, 10/3/2007

Humboldt, Del Norte, Trinity and Mendocino counties are the focus of a pilot project to map the digital divide. The project, funded by state and local donors, is intended to "lay the foundation" to bring broadband infrastructure to rural areas of the state.

The project was announced Tuesday during a news conference at the Humboldt Bay Aquatic Center in Eureka. Sunne McPeak, president and chief executive officer of the California Emerging Technology Fund, said the mission of the project is to close the digital divide in California — erasing the gap between those with access to high-speed broadband and those without.

The first phase of the project is a yearlong study of present infrastructure and demand in the four-county area. The data will be used to map the assets in place now, such as fiber networks and available towers for wireless transmission, as well as identify and aggregate the actual demand for access.

Speakers at the event included McPeak; Peter Pennekamp, executive director of the Humboldt Area Foundation; Humboldt State University President Rollin Richmond; and Connie Stewart, field representative for Assemblymember Patty Berg (D-Eureka).

Only 50 percent of Humboldt County's population has access to the Internet, said Stewart, with coverage extending to only 10 percent of the total land mass.

"If we don't start catching up here, all of our industries are in trouble."

Stewart related the story of a health clinic in Trinity County, which still depends on the mail for its medical billing. Most medical offices rectify their billing with the state via the Internet, where results are almost instantaneous.

This clinic, Stewart said, sends bundles of paperwork periodically to Sacramento to be transcribed. Disaster almost struck when two numbers were transposed on a bundle of bills totaling more than \$100,000. The state subsequently denied the funds and without the help of an "angel in the basement," the clinic would have been unable to re-file for the

expenses.

It wouldn't have been an issue if the clinic had broadband, Stewart said.

She's worked for four years with an alphabet soup of civic entities — Redwood Coast Rural Action, the Redwood Technology Consortium, HSU, among others — to promote access for all.

"Our goal was broadband for everyone at a reasonable price," Stewart said. "We may not be able to do it, but we're going to try our darnedest."

The Redwood Coast Connect initiative is funded in part by a \$250,000 grant from CETF, which was matched by local donors. They include the Headwaters Fund, the Melvin and Grace McLean Foundation, HAF, Redwood Region Economic Development Commission and the four participating counties.

The effort is not without its skeptics. Michael Ireton, of Willits Online, said he's been providing service to rural areas of Mendocino County for years and would have more area under wireless broadband coverage if there weren't so many obstacles like high application fees and mounds of paperwork.

Ireton said he could probably provide all of Mendocino County with wireless broadband access for the \$500,000 being used to study the possibility of luring major telecoms into rural areas.

"The big guys just aren't going to go for it for 10 to 15 more customers," he said.