

## **Half a million granted for rural connectivity study**

Luc Cebulski/The Times-Standard  
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EUREKA -- A mere 50 percent of Humboldt County's population has access to a broadband Internet connection, said Connie Stewart, senior field representative for Assemblywoman Patty Berg, at a press conference Tuesday.

As for the physical area of the county with broadband access, that number is closer to 10 percent.

Those are numbers that Humboldt State University and Redwood Coast Rural Action are looking to improve with the help of a \$500,000 grant awarded by regional fund providers and the California Emerging Technology Fund,

And the focus is not only on Humboldt County, but Del Norte, Trinity and Mendocino counties as well.

HSU, in collaboration with RCRA, created the Redwood Coast Connect project, aimed at compiling detailed information that will demonstrate the increasing broadband needs of the four rural counties, in the hopes of attracting broadband service providers.

"The first key step is to communicate with business leaders," said Steve Karp, project manager for Redwood Coast Connection. "Which is no small task."

Karp said the study will collect information from all the outlying areas in the four counties, not just the cities that show up prominently on the map.

The study will also include a series of eight community meetings, held throughout the four counties, to collect information from the public regarding interest and need for broadband connectivity. The first meeting is scheduled for Nov. 7 in Weaverville with the second scheduled for Nov. 8 in Crescent City. Times and exact locations will be announced at a later date.

In order to get the attention of the big broadband providers, the ones who will build the infrastructure needed, Karp said they need to see that there is a demand.

"The goal of this study is to see what's in place now and to see what needs to be done," Karp said. "The database will give us a map of the playing field."

Those who are already providing broadband connections to some of the more remote areas of the North Coast hope that the end result of the Redwood Coast Connect study will be a decrease in red tape, access fees and paperwork.

"I'd really like to see them find ways to spend this money that will make it easier for me to go out and do the work," said Mike Ireton of Willits Online, who specializes in providing wireless connections to remote communities.

Ireton said the actual installation of a wireless network is relatively easy. It's acquiring access to the most advantageous hilltop locations, extraneous inspection fees and piles of paperwork, that make his job hard.

That, and the big telecommunication companies have the installation rights in many rural areas but don't feel any pressure to provide the service, he said.

"Take Verizon for example," Ireton said "The way they see it, if you need broadband access today you're still going to need it in five years. So why not wait."

That's essentially what the Redwood Coast Connect study is hoping to show service providers -- why the time for waiting is over.

By mapping where people live and work and where broadband access is and isn't available through out the

four counties, supporters of the Redwood Coast Connect project say the need will be evident.

"There isn't an industry that exists that doesn't need Internet access," said Stewart, citing growing medical agencies, educational institutions and private businesses.

Sunne Wright-McPeak, president and CEO of California Emerging Technology Fund, said the Redwood Coast Connect project will be the prototype for the rest of the state.

"We're here first because this area has done its homework," Wright-McPeak said. "People in California know that this area is doing the trailblazing. We are looking to this area as a model."

Draft results of the Redwood Coast Connect study are slated to be presented in June 2008 and Stewart is optimistic.

"We may not be able to provide broadband service to every single person," Stewart said, "But that's our goal."

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