

Get Smart, California—Get Connected!

By Sunne Wright McPeak

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One of the smartest strategies to spur economic recovery is to get all Californians connected through broadband—high-speed access to the Internet—at home, school, work and in all public places.

Today, the ability to be “connected” instantly through the Internet to information, services and digital tools is increasingly critical for access to and success in education, jobs, and economic opportunity. High-speed Internet networks are essential 21st Century infrastructure—as vital to commerce, economic competitiveness and quality of life as the transportation system was to the last century. In addition, broadband is a “green technology” that can significantly reduce impacts on the environment by offsetting vehicle trips, decreasing the use of resources, and saving energy.

Yet, while California is home to a wellspring of innovation that has given rise to the evolution of broadband and information technology, the use by Californians as a whole is only on par with the national average. Today, more than 14 million Californians remain unconnected to the Internet through broadband, which is greater in population than Illinois, the 5th most populous state. And, the 1.4 million rural residents who have no access to broadband live across 44,000 square miles, about the size of Kentucky. Progress is being made because of leadership from the Governor, Legislature, California Public Utilities Commission and the California Emerging Technology Fund. A year ago, 55% of Californians were using broadband, today it is 62%; about 1/3 of low-income households and Latino families were using broadband, and now it is 40%.

This differential in access to and adoption of broadband technology among sub-groups of the population is referred to as the Digital Divide, which in reality is actually another facet of “economic divide” for too many Californians. Such a gap is unacceptable if California is to reach its full potential for prosperity, stimulate productivity gains that attract new investment and generates jobs, and achieve many of the additional benefits high-speed Internet access can provide.

- Imagine the ability to access your health records remotely and have your medical conditions monitored at home.
- Imagine every student being able to have a computer and broadband connection at home to better learn and do their homework with their parents able to follow their progress at school.
- Imagine all public services—from getting your vehicle registration to renewing your pet’s license to taking an education course to upgrade your job skills—being available with the touch of a key from your computer or mobile PDA.

Fortunately, the opportunity for California to “get smart” by “getting connected” is within our grasp.

California voters have approved billions in infrastructure bonds, the federal government has approved economic stimulus funds, and the California Public Utilities Commission has established

a fund to help extend broadband into unserved and underserved communities. California must now commit to achieving ubiquitous broadband and promoting digital literacy. All school children must have access to computers connected to broadband and be equipped with the skills to maximize their use for learning. Every public agency at the local, regional, state and federal levels must facilitate the deployment of broadband and build the technology into every infrastructure construction project. Californians deserve no less. Now is the time for California to **Get Connected!**

Sunne Wright McPeak is President and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF), established pursuant to the orders of the California Public Utilities Commission in approving the mergers of SCB-AT&T and Verizon-MCI in 2005. CETF is an independent, public-purpose non-profit organization with a mission to close the Digital Divide in California. Find out more at www.cetfund.org