

Broadband Alliance meets to strategize

Looking ahead, assessing efforts

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The Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County met Friday to assess the state of rural Internet service, and strategize ways to improve it. Alliance Chair Trish Steel described the organization as “an ad-hoc advocacy group comprised of the Economic Development and Financing Corporation (EDFC), the Community Foundation, and the Mendocino Coast Broadband Alliance” (which is a non-profit 501c3). The Alliance, she said, has the full support of the Executive Committee, which includes Fifth District Supervisor Dan Hamburg.

One purpose of the group is to connect local internet service providers to California Advance Services Fund (CASF) infrastructure grants. These grants are administered by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), from fees on telephone calls within the state. According to cpuc.ca.gov.CASF, “The CASF provides grants to “telephone corporations” to bridge the “digital divide” in unserved and underserved areas in the state,” by supporting projects that provide broadband to areas that have no access, or expanding facilities in those with very little access. The grants may be obtained upon application by the North Bay/North Coast Broadband Consortium, which includes Mendocino, Sonoma, Napa and Marin Counties, and which exists for the purpose of regional and county broadband planning. Steel is the Deputy Manager of the Consortium, a position Mendocino county funded when it joined the organization.

The first item on the agenda was an update on the Consortium grants, which are in a prolonged period of review. Steel characterized the protracted process as “frustrating.”

The next item concerned the Phones That Work campaign, which arose as a response to AB 2395, a bill that would have allowed telephone companies to end landline service by 2020. In a letter Steel distributed to attendees, the Alliance characterizes telecommunications companies as seeking “a simpler, de-regulated way to end their obligations” to provide legacy services such as landlines, which are expensive to maintain. AB 2395 was defeated, but the Alliance cautions against rural residents “feeling secure that their landline services are protected.”

Jim Persky, President of Pacific Internet in Ukiah, said that, had AB 2395 passed, “my other major in college, besides computer science, was ceramics, so I’d be throwing pots right now.” Because businesses like his rely on copper wires, he added that if the bill had been successful, “other than the wireless, all the ISP’s (Internet Service Providers) would be gone.”

In economic news, Steel reminded attendees that the Sonoma Mendocino Economic Development District, which is the result of a 2015 joint powers agreement between the two counties, is calling for projects to diversify local economies. Grants for this purpose come from the federal Economic Development Administration. The proposals do not have to be broadband-related, but Steel plans to submit one for a fiber network in Ukiah, and the Consortium hopes to win a grant for a project to lay down fiber optic cable between Santa Rosa and Laytonville. This, said Steel, is an “open access way to have some alternative, mid-

mile, besides AT&T.” Katie Gibbs, of the Community Foundation, planned to submit an educational application. The deadline for proposals is September 15.

Steel delivered an update on the CPUC hearing in Ukiah, where Commissioner Catherine Sandoval heard testimony about rural call completion and power outages. Sandoval, whom Steel characterized as sympathetic to rural concerns, will sit as Commissioner until December, at which time Governor Jerry Brown will either re-appoint her or call on someone else to fill her seat. Steel hoped that “getting all of this into the record” would further efforts to hold AT&T accountable for failing to provide reliable telephone and internet service.

Goals and strategies for a broadband working group were next on the agenda. Steel hoped to form a group that includes educational institutions, city councils, the Community Foundation, and ISPs to come up with goals and strategies and get them endorsed at the county level. An earlier project, created in 2012 and scuttled in 2014, was reliant on an independent ISP called Golden Bear. Golden Bear’s proposal to provide service to rural areas was challenged by the incumbent providers, who claimed (according to an article published in a Santa Rosa paper at the time <http://tinyurl.com/grhuk4p>) that unserved areas were actually receiving full digital access.

Congressman Jared Huffman’s field representative Heather Gurewitz, who called in for part of the meeting, addressed the issue of broadband mapping. Huffman, she said, supports AB 1549, Representative Jim Wood’s Rural Broadband Map Act. However, Gurewitz was not optimistic about its chances of making it out of committee. She added that many bills do not pass the first time they are proposed.

Persky spoke again to offer an update from a small ISP’s point of view. Pacific Internet recently acquired Clear Lake Internet, and Persky declared that, with so many small ISP’s shutting down, “I’m in the process of gobbling up as many as I can,” to stop AT&T and Comcast from getting a full monopoly.

He expressed hopes for working with the City of Ukiah to lay fiber optic cable, pointing out that “the municipality is a power company,” which means that an entrepreneur would not have to get permission from AT&T or PG&E to string fiber optic cable on the power lines. He pointed to Cruzio, an ISP in Santa Cruz whose website claims to prioritize “promoting our city as a technology hub.” He also said that some major metropolitan areas lay fiber optic cables in their sewer lines, rather than laying new groundwork for the technology.

During the discussion portion of the meeting, Elk resident Jeffrey Parker spoke about the impact that quality broadband has on rural businesses. He reminded attendees of Further Reach (formerly known as Celerate), a \$2 million Google-funded project undertaken by UC Berkeley and Stanford scholars to provide internet to consumers from Elk to Point Arena.

Parker said a friend of his, who has a business building foreign motorcycles, had benefitted greatly from the faster internet in Point Arena. “He could be hanging out, sitting and looking for parts” on overseas websites that take a long time to load, Parker said, “or he could be wrenching on bikes.”

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