

Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County working for better Internet

Wants to bring more business, investment to Willits

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The Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County met Friday, Nov. 4 to discuss how to better serve the county in its struggle for reliable Internet and landline access.

One of their main goals is to create a “middle-mile,” a system that connects a rural town’s network to a larger city, where it intersects with major carriers. This would provide more local network options and, hopefully, better service.

They raised concerns about the ongoing struggle with AT&T and its copper wire system, which is steadily deteriorating.

Fifth District Supervisor Dan Hamburg is all too familiar with AT&T’s connectivity problems, especially in the rain, which the copper wiring is extremely susceptible to.

“I was talking to Trish on my AT&T landline and I couldn’t hear a thing,” he says. “It had rained the day before.”

Jim Persky, CEO of Pacific Internet in Ukiah, relates to that experience.

“AT&T reminds me of the wicked witch in The Wizard of Oz,” says Persky. “When the rain comes and there’s a lot of water, they both disappear.”

Mike Nicholls, Access Sonoma Broadband manager, says AT&T will fight any middle-mile funding for the California Advanced Services Fund because they don’t want any competition from local providers.

Nicholls is representing Sonoma County on a joint effort with Mendocino County to create an economic development district, to be decided on by next spring. They have already selected local projects to work on, once created, to grow investment from home.

Since AT&T has a monopoly in surrounding areas, local businesses are left with little to no choice for an Internet and/or landline provider, which is why the alliance members want to stop the broadband goliath from encroaching on any more of their territory.

Recently, Broadband Alliance Chairwoman Trish Steel and Willits City Planner Dusty Duley applied for an EPA grant designed to help revitalize main streets of small towns. They hope the program, “Cool & Connected,” will attract business and investment to Willits, both much needed following the bypass opening.

“We want to inspire and show that broadband can spur economic activity,” says Steel.

They should hear the results of their application in a few months. They're also awaiting approval of their North Bay/North Coast Broadband Consortium grant renewal, which helps fund the promotion of broadband access and adoption in rural communities, to be decided on in December.

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