

## Mendocino Coast Broadband Alliance

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Connecting our Rural Communities



Broadband - cable or wireless?

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Article for Beacon and Advocate News -

Cable/fiber optics or wireless – that is the question that was raised in a recent Letter to the Editor. The writer of the article, Helen Sears, made statements that are not wholly correct and Mendocino Coast Broadband Alliance and Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County want to offer clarification.

Sears made these statements, none of which are wholly true – 1. “The Wireless industry is working hard to eliminate cable connections, even though the cables, specifically fiber optic cables, provide Internet service 400 times faster than WIFI.” 2. “The wireless industry is targeting as many communities as it can, especially rural communities, to accept wireless as a replacement for cable. 3. “We must take a firm stand to keep our existing fiber optic connections in place and well maintained.”

MCBA and BAMC offer these responses to aid understanding of the situation - Existing WIRED high speed Internet systems on the Coast are operated by Comcast through the coaxial cable that delivers a television signal and MCN Fusion via ADSL using ATT copper landlines, but ONLY in select areas. Neither of these is fiber optics. Fiber optics exists for what is referred to as the “middle-mile” or the fiber that connects the major trunk lines (backbones) in the valleys to our lines out on the Coast. The local lines are referred to as “last-mile”. In addition, the speed of fiber is currently measured in Terabits, which is a thousand times faster than the maximum wireless speed measured in Gigabits. It is not 400 times faster as the author states, but much - much - greater.

The wireless companies – some of which are also incumbent wireline (landline) phone service providers - are indeed pushing wireless as the last-mile solution over the fixed plant (e.g. copper and fiber) in rural areas. Wireless is cheaper to operate, quicker to restore, and easier to deploy. Fixed plant is expensive, time consuming and in the event of

natural disaster it takes a significant amount of resources to restore.

BAMC has priced construction projects for fiber based Internet service to homes on the Coast and the costs run into the millions of dollars. There is no way a commercial provider can recover that investment selling services to a few subscribers at \$49.95 per month. Wireless towers allow a subscriber to divide the cost amongst thousands of subscribers and hence the wireless cost model works. Even with the help of national and state grants, is not financially feasible for a rural area with households spaced miles apart. It is necessary to be realistic and face the fact that anything other than wireless is too costly to install in this rural area. Sea Ranch, however, is installing a private fiber optic network paid for by the residents and the Association because the homes are closely spaced so it makes financial sense.

Comcast has made it clear locally and nationwide that it will not extend service beyond the existing footprint because it is not worth the investment. ATT will not extend their service that makes extension of ADSL possible for the same reason, and therefore MCN Fusion cannot go further. ATT has, however, made a statement that they will maintain their existing copper network for these services and telephone landlines.

The good news is that there are smaller wireless companies (using short poles instead of towers) with different Return on Investment needs now interested in serving the Coast. BAMC and MCBA are working diligently to attract and support wireless providers to serve the 80% of households on the Coast that do not have acceptable high speed Internet service.

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