

High-speed internet remains a concern

Libraries receive \$90,000 in grant funding

By Sean P. Thomas / Calaveras Enterprise / March 9, 2017

When high-speed fiber wires were put into the ground, the idea was that it would thrust rural Calaveras County into the vast web of the internet, but almost five years later, the county is still bringing up the rear when it comes to high-speed internet access.

“We have a quilt work coverage,” said District 2 Calaveras County Supervisor Jack Garamendi. “And that leaves people out.”

Garamendi said that he has a particular interest in bringing more readily available access to the web to most rural parts of the county and that the Board of Supervisors is following suit. He said there are a lot of people in the country-side who avoid computers and the internet altogether, but that businesses and the economy stand to benefit a great deal from increased advertising capabilities and job training.

“We need to get more of it up there and we need to get it more consistent,” said Garamendi. “It needs to be good; it needs to be consistent because it’s a vital tool for the future economy of Calaveras County.”

The county received a fiber-optic line in 2012, with the hopes of improving broadband service, but the county is still waiting to receive the full benefit from the line. The wire was laid by a partnership between the Central Valley Independent Network LLC and the Corporation for Education Network Initiatives in California. Those partners were awarded \$46.6 million in stimulus funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2010. The money was spent on the installation of a fiber-optic broadband internet line through 18 counties in California, including those in the Mother Lode.

As of now, only two government entities tap into the line, the Government Center in San Andreas and the Calaveras County Office of Education in Angels Camp. Garamendi said the utilizing the already laid infrastructure is vital.

“We have one of the biggest cables running through our county; we have to tap into those lines, said Garamendi. “It’s the equivalent of having a freeway through your community without having onramps.”

Local internet service providers groaned over stalled implementation processes and higher-than-expected demand. According to a spokesman for the Central Valley Next-Generation Broadband Infrastructure Project, Cal.net is the only internet service provider connected at this time.

Garamendi said that when future road work is completed in rural areas, the county concurrently improves internet lines destroyed during the Butte Fire. He also wants to make the improvement of a fixed-wireless system a priority in the area.

“I want to make sure that when we dig up those roads, we’re putting conduits under there,” said Garamendi.

In the meantime, the Calaveras County Library is finding ways to help those who are yearning for internet access by increasing the speeds offered at its rural branches. Last week, Calaveras County Librarian Nancy Giddens went before the Board of Supervisors to outline a California State Library grant to improve the internet speeds at most rural libraries in the county.

The state library offered the Calaveras County library system \$90,000 in grant funding to help put high-speed internet into the Arnold, Murphys, Angels Camp and Valley Springs libraries. Calaveras library administrators chose those four because they have historically been the most poorly served in terms of high-speed internet access. Each of the libraries will receive \$15,000 in funding.

Giddens said that students without internet access stand to gain the most from the grant.

“I’m excited about this,” said Giddens. “Kids in high school are given iPads and cellphones, but when they get home they don’t have internet access, limited or sometimes at all. They will have to go to the library to do it, but at least they will have the internet.”

Giddens said cyber traffic will be connected to the county’s data center in San Andreas and then distributed to the different libraries. She’s also looking at ways to increase the speeds at the three other libraries in Copperopolis, West Point and San Andreas.

A secondary goal is to provide the county with a resource hub for job training, remediation and research. Giddens acknowledged that a large portion of the county residents only come in contact with computers or the internet when they walk through area libraries’ doors.

“It’s going to expand what we can offer,” she said. “In every community, we have public access computers and they are, because of poor internet connectivity and accessibility, why people come to the library. I’m not just talking about people who could not afford an (internet) provider, but people who can afford a provider, but there is no provider.”