

Opinion: Expanded broadband key to Tahoe's future

By Chris Fajkos

When it comes to having access to broadband Internet, in this day and age it's absolutely essential in order for the Tahoe basin to flourish. Unfortunately for the Tahoe basin there are still pockets all around the lake that are either unserved or underserved. These underserved areas have download speeds under 6 Mbps and 1.5 Mbps upload, as per the California Public Utilities Commission's definition of minimum speeds.

To put things into context, the average broadband speeds in San Francisco are 75.92 Mbps down and 25.70 Mbps up. This deficiency presents a huge problem for the region because without access to broadband Internet our local businesses, schools, hospitals, and local government agencies are placed at a disadvantage, jeopardizing economic development, public safety, and overall regional prosperity.

The dangers that come with not having access to broadband Internet are extensive and all facets of our society are impacted. Public safety is placed at risk when they are unable to share critical emergency management information quickly and securely. Schools suffer because teachers and students are unable to use the online resources they need. Hospitals and medical offices require fast and secure access to broadband in order to send and receive medical files and other medical information. Economic growth slows to a crawl as local businesses struggle to remain competitive if their Point of Sale swipers don't work.

Understanding that a "digital divide" exists in the basin, the Tahoe Prosperity Center applied for and received a grant from the California Public Utilities Commission to help carry out

their Connected Tahoe Project. The funds received from CPUC's California Advanced Services Fund went toward the collection of local Internet speed data, assisting broadband infrastructure providers with applying for CPUC grants, and convening with applicable stakeholders to identify opportunities for broadband expansion in the Tahoe basin.

The information obtained from Tahoe Prosperity Center's initial work painted a disappointing picture for the region in terms of broadband coverage and service. Speed test results that were completed by basin residents clearly identified numerous problem areas, indicating that the problem is basinwide.

The next step in the Connected Tahoe Project will aim to facilitate broadband infrastructure projects in those problem areas. This will be done, primarily, by working with the CPUC to identify Internet service providers (ISPs) that are ready, able, and willing to provide infrastructure, as well as through TPC's push for a basinwide "Dig Once Policy."

The Dig Once Policy essentially means that when there's a public improvement project happening somewhere in the basin, such as a bike path improvement; then conduit for broadband fiber would be included in the project. This way there is no need to dig the same area up again later to install conduit.

The Tahoe Prosperity Center is the only organization focused on this issue for the benefit of Tahoe's residents and businesses and will stay focused on our Connected Tahoe Project. We hope that basin residents continue to speak up and draw attention to this issue.

Chris Fajkos is the project manager for Tahoe Prosperity Center.