



Broadband Leaders in Action: An Interview with Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia



Other

Tuesday, December 9, 2014

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In an effort to spotlight regional broadband champions, we will be posting interviews with Leaders in Action to hear how they are working to close the Digital Divide. This is part of an effort to do outreach to Local Government Officials through a partnership with the California Emerging Technology Fund.

This is our second in a series of interviews that highlights the work of Supervisor John Gioia of Contra Costa County. Supervisor Gioia has been a long-time proponent of broadband and partner in the effort to close the digital divide.

How do you see broadband advancing your goals both as President of CSAC and as a County Supervisor?

Broadband has become a necessary component of information sharing and communication. Counties can better serve communities and really reduce the digital divide by understanding that access to broadband means access to services and access to opportunities.

Improving infrastructure is very important. We also have to provide equal access to that infrastructure for all residents. If we just expand infrastructure and don't improve connectivity, we are not helping our communities. This especially applies to young people in our foster care system and young people in low-income families. It is important to give them the same opportunities we give to other young people. We can equate the Internet to equal opportunity, so you put people at a clear disadvantage when they don't have broadband access.

A good example is the work that the California Air Resources Board (CARB) and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD) are doing to measure air quality, and also make that information readily available and easily accessible on the Internet. However, if people don't have access to the Internet, they cannot access the real-time air quality information to manage their own health and the health of their families. This information is also going to help drive policy because when agencies are transparent and the information is available, residents can push public officials to improve air quality.

The BAAQMD is developing a new regulation that requires greater monitoring of air quality around oil refineries and they are also going to make that information available to the public in real-time on the

Internet. We need to focus on giving communities the tools to manage their own health and having access to this information is of great importance.

Why is it important that young people in the foster care system and those that have recently left the system, be equipped with laptops and access to high-speed Internet?

Most youth in the foster care system are living with low-income families and need additional tools to put them on an equal footing with other youth from an equal access standpoint. They cannot afford laptops or Internet access and are facing more institutional obstacles and barriers.

Moving to a new community has its challenges. Foster youth are often put into situations where you have to develop a new social network and support system. This is an obstacle and challenge for any young person that has to move, let alone a young person in the foster care system. Having a laptop will allow them to get better connected in a new community and find the resources they need.

We have been involved with youth that are just going into the system and those that are just leaving and we find that laptops are essential in improving educational opportunities for these youth. I see the role that computers and the Internet play for my own 10-year-old daughter. They are vital and are much more important today than even a few years ago.

How can broadband access and deployment help further your commitment to improved air quality, both as a Supervisor and in your role as a California Air Resources Board member?

If people have the ability to stream live Internet video, they can watch and participate in public meetings, like watching what we do at the BAAQMD. We have set up sites in the North, South and East Bay so that people can give testimony on an issue to the air district board from a remote location. This means that people can both gather information and listen in, while also providing input. We have even made it possible for board members to participate from a remote location if necessary. Speed is important for people to be able to participate in the expansion of public access to the decision making process. Access to real-time information is really key.

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