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County General Plan – Communications Element

Remarks to Humboldt County Planning Commission, July 22, 2010
by Sean McLaughlin for Access Humboldt

Humboldt County's General Plan should include a visionary new Communications Element focusing on fundamental policies for informing communities to sustain democracy. With vision and intelligence, the General Plan can create a solid policy framework to support local broadband media for the next generation that is designed to serve public safety, health, education, civic engagement, economic development and other public purposes.

First, the Plan must affirm that: **Communication is an essential human need and a fundamental human right.**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 sums it up nicely: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." (UN, 1948)

From the Knight Commission report "Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age" (2009), there are three essential recommendations that should be adopted as goals in Humboldt County's General Plan:

A: Maximizing the availability of relevant and credible information: People need relevant and credible information to be free and self-governing.

B: Enhancing the information capacity of individuals: People need tools, skills, and understanding to use information effectively.

C: Promoting public engagement: To pursue their true interests, people need to be engaged with information and with each other."

To reach these goals, five important principles can help to guide the General Plan:

1. ENSURE UNIVERSAL ACCESS

Local policy needs to address the human impact – the opportunity for all people, regardless of their digital skills, geographical and socio-economic situation, to create and to share information useful for their own life plans.

Critical elements of universal access include:

- **Infrastructure access.**

Broadband deployment must provide bandwidth capacity that will enable people to connect for meaningful communication – regardless of where they live.

- Access lawful Internet content of their choice
- Run applications and use services of their choice (subject to needs of law enforcement)
- Connect their choice of legal devices that do not harm the network
- Choose between multiple network providers, application and service providers, and content providers

County of Humboldt should endorse these principles and engage with other jurisdictions to adopt and enforce network neutrality rules and laws mandating the equal treatment of all communication consistent with these FCC principles.

4. PROTECT RIGHT TO PRIVACY

The freedom to hold opinions without interference isn't possible without safeguards to protect privacy. All members of the community must be protected from government and corporate surveillance.

The right to privacy includes:

- Personal data protection, including the collection and handling of data such as credit information, medical and government records
- Communications privacy, including the security and privacy of mail, phone, e-mail and other forms of communication

County policies in the General Plan should affirm and protect the right to privacy.

5. FUTURE CAPACITY: PLAN FOR BALANCE

Future networks must make it as easy to distribute content as it is to consume. That means that speed standards for broadband network access must consider both upload and download rates and upload speeds must be given special priority to ensure full participation by least served communities.

Standards for broadband capacity are rapidly changing – so it's important not to get locked into obsolete technology goals. The General Plan must promote building networks that offer high-quality service, low latency, and the functionality to meet the service and application needs of our communications future.

The Internet is a global public infrastructure. Local communication networks must support open fast connections to the backbone of the Internet globally, at speeds that go beyond the past and current frontiers of communication and commerce.

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These comments are based in large part on work done by Access Humboldt, Main Street Project, Media Mobilizing Project and other community based organizations involved with the Media and Democracy Coalition.