

Good morning!

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A Times-Standard editorial**Information superhighway cannot bypass backwoods**

Everywhere one turns these days, there's talk about the coming information superhighway — that giant network of fiber optics, digital switching systems and so-called broad-band services that promises to transform modern life.

In the not too distant future, we're told, Americans will have at their fingertips massive quantities of information — much of it video-based — delivered over an interactive network of space-age phone lines or some similarly high-tech delivery system.

On the North Coast, Cox Cable Humboldt is already beginning to rewire its 31,000 customers for this new age, linking present coaxial cable systems with an expensive new fiber optic network. Pacific Bell is committed to being a player throughout California, and there are even wireless systems now being developed that could eventually enter the competitive field.

The applications of this new technology are apparently limitless — ranging from simple consumer delights such as movies on demand and push-button shopping to instantaneous review of medical X-rays by specialists hundreds or thousands of miles away.

But rural regions need to keep the pressure on the developers of these new systems to assure that outlying areas don't become second-tier players in this emerging arena.

In the case of PacBell, for example, the present emphasis is clearly on getting these services to urban centers where the larger populations loom as a vast and lucrative market.

PacBell's time line for providing its version of the fiber optic network is to reach half of its customers — roughly 5.5 million — by the year 2000. But all of these customers are in the major metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange County and the San Francisco Bay Area.

The rest of PacBell's customers — including those on the North Coast — are lumped together under a tentative company commitment, presently unfunded, to be serviced by 2010. That's an awfully long wait for those beyond the reach of present

cable systems, or for those within reach who know competition is the key to keeping prices down.

The issue is particularly important to Humboldt and Del Norte counties because this emerging technology has great promise for rural economic development.

Lower costs of living, a more family-oriented environment and good labor pools make this region attractive to businesses, provided they can get their products or services out to markets from this area.

A high-data superhighway could be the answer. One clear rural application of this new technology is the expanded prospect for "telecommuting" — allowing people to work in their homes or, at least, far close to them, through the use of individual or clustered computers. Through such computer linkups, a range of business tasks — including face-to-face video meetings — could be conducted remotely.

Other rural applications include desktop publishing, in-home businesses such as travel planning, financial consulting or insurance review and similar endeavors. Once the information superhighway is in place, virtually any business that requires the processing or delivery of information could be done remotely.

In short, this technology will allow more people to work where they want to live. It will transform jobs traditionally found only in metropolitan areas and make them appropriate to rural locales.

But rural areas need to develop a louder voice in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. to assure that outlying regions are afforded competitively priced access to any and all of the new information technologies that are emerging. Even being a few years off pace could leave this region in the dust as looming opportunities are grabbed elsewhere.

The time is now for our region's elected representatives and business leaders to speak out. They need to keep the heat on Congress, the state Legislature, the Public Utilities Commission and other regulatory agencies to see that rural telecommunications goals are not drowned out by urban priorities. ■