

Outages send strong message about telecommunications

"This had better be an emergency," said my colleague Tina. I had tried calling her twice on her business line and finally broke down and called her personal line during dinner.

I replied: "I'm sorry to bother you, but listen to this. The Internet is not working, stores in the mall can't process gift cards, I had to call you on my cell because my landline phone doesn't connect, and I couldn't leave you a voice mail on your business line. I think it happened."

"Wow," she replied.

For years, Tina and others from the Redwood Technology Consortium have worked in partnership with RREDCO on improving the telecommunications infrastructure to our region. It started with advocating for removing state-mandated fees for the installation of the single fiber optic line that connects us to the outside world. More recently, it has involved leading a project funded by the County of Humboldt to determine the feasibility of installing a second fiber to provide redundancy to the system. We all have been warning that, though the risk was small, we could be faced with a telecommunications crisis if the single line were to be broken. The event was hypothetical, though it had occurred in other regions before. We really did not know if or when it would occur here. Nor did we really know what the effect would be if it did.

On Tuesday, it happened. At approximately 2:40 p.m., the fiber optic line connecting us to the outside world broke somewhere near Laytonville. According to news reports, the line was repaired by about 6:00 a.m. the next morning. The effects of this break were widespread, though at this point it's still hard to determine the extent of the outage. I suspect that for most folks, the immediate reaction was to try to find out what was wrong with their personal computers or cell phones. I know I spent the better part of an hour rebooting and reinstalling my network connection at home, thinking that it must be my problem. It was not until my family returned from shopping and reported the problems at the stores that I began to see a bigger picture. It was confirmed when I was unable to call Tina in Eureka from my home in Ferndale.

Having grown up in Southern Humboldt, I'm well acquainted with power outages. They announce themselves very clearly as all immediately goes dark and quiet. Our first reaction was often to look out the window to check to see if the neighbors were dark too. If they were, we knew that the problem was not ours. Our second reaction was often to call someone to see if their power was out too, because even when the power



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was out the phones always worked.

The telecommunications outage did not give us such dramatic announcement and at this point it's pretty unclear about what services were lost and what remained online. One person might notice that their Internet connection was down; another would be frustrated by a cell phone that might not work. More problematic would be the business who suddenly found itself cut off from its network or the public safety personnel who could not call in on their cell phones. Did our health care institutions lose service? What else was lost?

This outage was a message that we need to move faster toward increasing our telecommunications security. We have two strategies to do this. The first is to pursue the opportunities identified in the recently completed the feasibility study on the second fiber optic line. A link to the study can be found at www.rredc.com. The County has agreed to further funding to pursue this project in 2007. However, we need to act now to begin discussions with businesses and organizations who could participate in funding the installation of the second line.

The second strategy is to bring this issue to the Governor's Broadband Task Force. Two of our own, Rollin Richmond of Humboldt State University and Peter Pennekamp of the Humboldt Area Foundation have been appointed to this Task Force. They need to stress to that group that merely focusing on deployment of broadband to end users is not enough. The state must play a role in ensuring that the political and economic regions of the entire state have sufficient infrastructure to ensure that their telecommunications remain reliable.

Let's face it, we got lucky this time. The outage occurred the day after Christmas. Most of us were probably at home recuperating from Christmas. Many businesses were closed or had curtailed their operations. Schools were not in session. However, we've been warned. We might not be so lucky the next time.

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