

Digital Infrastructure for the Community, by the Community

By Eloise Lee

"In East Palo Alto, we've realized that it's not a case of 'if you build it, they will come.' Just because technology is in place doesn't necessarily mean people will find value in it," states Dr. Faye McNair-Knox, executive director of One East Palo Alto—an organizational member of the East Palo Alto Digital Village Program. "Working alongside groups who provide essential services to local residents has helped us to partner with individuals who have not participated to become familiar with the technology and develop their own value for it. You really have to build that whole base of value within a community for people to access technology."

Like water, gas, and electricity, access to the internet and other information technologies can no longer be viewed as a privilege, yet it remains out of reach to the disabled, communities of color, new immigrants, non-English speakers, the homeless, and low-income families (to name a few). The struggle to control broadband technology and the infrastructure that facilitates internet connectivity is contested by public, private, and nonprofit sectors. The rise and recent fall of municipal wireless ventures, such as in San Francisco, are examples of the tensions surrounding issues of sustainability, self-reliance, and ownership of broadband access. Broadband access involves a digital landscape that few city officials are willing to take direct responsibility for. Fortunately groups like the East Palo Alto Digital Village, a partnership of direct service providers and nonprofit organizations dedicated to improving the quality of life in neighborhoods throughout East Palo Alto, are leading the way. They are showing that it's possible to offer innovative approaches to building infrastructure that are locally determined by the stakeholders and residents they aim to serve.

East Palo Alto

Known as the gateway to all highways in California, East Palo Alto, or EPA as termed by locals, has long lived in the shadow of Palo Alto. The highways that split these two communities have become repre-

sentative of the multiple divides that keep them worlds apart. Aside from zip and area codes, both communities share little in common. The 10:1 income disparity between residents in both communities characterizes EPA's historical disconnection from the affluence of Palo Alto and Silicon Valley. Even before its inception as an official city in 1983, EPA's predominantly low income, immigrant, and Pacific Islander communities were isolated and removed from the social capital that borders its boundaries.

Fueled by the desire to close the social, economic, and technological gaps hindering EPA's engagement in the digital age, local EPA groups, community leaders, educators, and organizers banded together, later forming the East Palo Alto Digital Village in 2000.

Originally designed to leverage the existing framework and programs of groups already serving EPA residents, the EPA wireless network is not only a pipeline for the usual Internet traffic, such as checking e-mail and downloading media, but a tool for the uploading and sharing of culturally relevant content that is determined and created by community members themselves. Exemplified in the creation of WiFi101, an initiative that utilizes the EPA wireless network to provide youth job training opportunities through emerging technology, the EPA Digital Village Program proves that a wireless network built by the people and for the people is possible.

But unlike East Palo Alto, many cities, instead of asserting the public interest in broadband access and ownership, have chosen comfortable dependence: relying on private, for-profit vendors to own, operate, and finance municipal broadband projects, wireless or otherwise. In the end, cities are left with lofty promises and scores of residents excluded from participating in the information superhighway.

Earthlink Pulls Out

Before pulling out of its municipal wireless partnership with San Francisco and Philadelphia, Earthlink appeared to be at the forefront of Wi-Fi arrangements that promised “universal” coverage at virtually no cost to the host city. By funding the deployment of a jurisdiction’s entire wireless network, private vendors like Earthlink expected the pay off to come in the form of wireless service subscriptions from customers wanting faster and secure Internet service.

In San Francisco, the Earthlink ad-supported model appeared to solve all of San Francisco’s wireless woes. But in fact, once the details of the package were revealed it meant low-speed service, infinite advertisements, and potential privacy and security infringements.

In April 2007, after almost a year of contract negotiations, Earthlink discovered that their business model failed to attract enough citizen subscribers to make it profitable. San Francisco’s rush to mimic a private ownership model popularized by the promise of Philadelphia’s municipal broadband network, ended before it took shape. Not only did Earthlink leave an embarrassed San Francisco government and a floundering Google to pick up the pieces, but their decision resulted in the breakdown of Philadelphia’s highly publicized and much anticipated wireless network.

Grassroots Alternative Makes Some Headway

Instead of waiting years for the next municipal Wi-Fi proposal to be approved by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the “Free the Net” program, a project launched by Meraki, a wireless start-up based in Mountain View, California, convened a broad coalition of community-based groups to provide free Wi-



Fi to 40,000 people across two square miles of San Francisco, and are set to expand twenty-fold. By providing free wireless repeaters to city residents and installing solar-powered distribution points on the rooftops of privately owned buildings, the San Francisco Free the Net program has made universal access more of a reality—and for only a fraction of the cost of standalone Wi-Fi spots of municipal wireless models once spearheaded by private vendors like Earthlink.

Community driven solutions that counter-balance the top-down approach of for-profit marketplace broadband initiatives are being imagined and realized in neighborhoods across the country. Community ownership of digital infrastructure can take many forms, from the city department model of Burlington Telecom, to a cooperative network of organizations like the East Palo Alto Digital Village. Even when a network is on its last leg, as in Philadelphia, pockets of hope can materialize in the most unlikely places, inspiring seemingly disenfranchised groups to locally determine the content created and transmitted through broadband networks. As cities continue to close the acute divide that separates those who are linked into the digital universe and those who teeter on its periphery, community groups are forging the future of broadband from the ground up—no middlemen, no Earthlink, but a comprehensive approach to community internet that exceeds the limitations of existing network models, drawing strength from the people it aims to serve. ■

Photo:

Dr. Faye McNair-Knox, executive director of One East Palo Alto, speaks at a Digital Inclusion Conference in Oakland, California.

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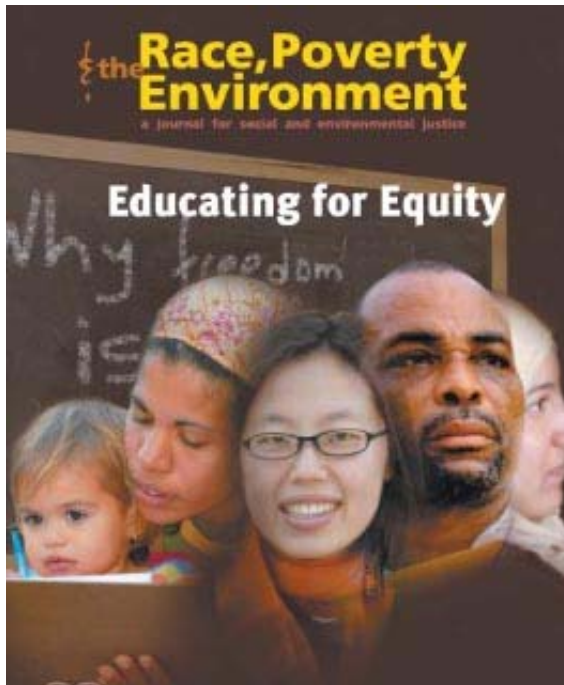
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