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A bid to boost region's telecom, Internet access

VALLEY FIRMS TO SEEK SOLUTIONS IN COOPERATIVE EFFORTS

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Is there a need? A need for speed?

Just like "Top Gun" characters, Silicon Valley companies feel the need to improve the region's not-so-high-speed Internet access and spotty cell phone connections, so they're joining with Bay Area government officials to tackle the problem.

Spurred by worries of losing business to faster rivals such as Japan and Korea, they will gather Monday to work on ways to improve the region's telecommunications systems, including streamlining city permit processes and licensing agreements for cell towers and cable lines.

"Business could well look elsewhere. It's hard to measure the impact, but you know we hear anecdotes," said Jim Wunderman, president and chief executive of the Bay Area Council, which is organizing the effort. "I think we're behind, it's fair to say. Other nations have made this a top priority."

Rob Atkinson, president of the non-profit Information Technology and Innovation Foundation in Washington, D.C., said regions have proven successful at streamlining city government processes.

The state of Kentucky, for example, created the "Connect Kentucky" project that organized private companies to invest in broadband services. There are also national efforts to create similar programs, Atkinson said.

But Scott Wallsten, director of communications policy studies for the non-profit think tank the Progress and Freedom Foundation in Washington, warns that fears of falling behind may be unfounded.

The Bay Area needs to collect evidence that companies need faster Internet connections, he said, adding that he doubted companies such as Google would suffer slow connections.

"If there is a problem in the Bay Area, the real question is what is it," Wallsten said. "You can have an anecdote for anything."

The desire to improve communications systems has been mounting in recent months. Last month the Communications Workers of America released a study measuring the connection speeds for 80,000 broadband users. The average download speed in the United States is 1.97 megabits per second, compared with 61 Mps for Japan, about 45 Mps for South Korea and 17 Mps for France, according to the study.

The international Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development recently released a study showing that the United States was lagging behind Denmark, Korea, Sweden and others in the number of broadband subscribers per capita.

"The trend is going the wrong way," said Joseph Bonocore, president and chief executive of Bonocore Technology Partners, which conducted a report being released Monday. "We want to look at those trends, understand those trends.

Regions can build successful communications systems but they must first work together to develop a long-term strategy, he said.

"We need to coordinate a lot better," Bonocore said. "Not everything that we do can be solved by an individual."

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