

Wide-ranging wireless access remains elusive in Central Pennsylvania

By Jim T. Ryan - 8/3/2007

If you own a laptop with wireless Internet or one of the newest technology-packed cell phones, your gear is on the future's edge.

Wireless devices are everywhere, but the wireless-Internet revolution is still a little slow in coming to Central Pennsylvania. Municipal Wi-Fi, which allows computer users to access the Internet from anywhere, hasn't become a reality yet. The problem, according to communications companies, is that engineering work on the systems is expensive, and the market is demanding other forms of wireless-Internet access.

Several large American cities are aggressively tackling Wi-Fi, including Philadelphia and San Francisco. Other cities already have some form of Wi-Fi service, including New Orleans.

Harrisburg, too, had aspirations for Wi-Fi coverage. Those efforts date back to 2003. The plan was to cover most of Second Street and the Capitol complex with free-access Wi-Fi.

"The mayor remains very interested in securing Wi-Fi service throughout the city," said Matt Coulter, spokesman for Harrisburg Mayor Stephen R. Reed.

"However, to date, efforts have been stymied by lack of city resources to help pay for it. If and when the city has sufficient fiscal resources to restart the effort, the mayor plans to have the entire city wired for Wi-Fi."

Until such time, Coulter said, there are Wi-Fi hotspots throughout the city, such as at the Harrisburg Hilton on Second and Market streets.

Coulter did not give cost estimates for a Wi-Fi project in Harrisburg.

The status of Wi-Fi in York and Lancaster could not be determined. Officials there could not be reached for comment.

Hotspots are the norm in most metropolitan areas, communication executives said. Businesses such as cafés and restaurants use open wireless connections to draw computer users. Some larger cities have more resources to spend on citywide Wi-Fi coverage.

"The big boys are still learning how to do it," said Scott Austin, president of York County-based Double Dog Communications.

Over the last nine months, Double Dog spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to quadruple its wireless infrastructure. The York Township company is spreading point-to-point wireless services, which use transmitters and repeaters to bounce the Internet from building to tower to building using airwaves. Repeaters strengthen and relay a signal to its next destination.

Other companies are also expanding the reach of high-speed broadband Internet to suburban and rural areas through point-to-point wireless. While traditional Wi-Fi hotspots are open to anyone with a laptop, point-to-point is usually a secure connection.

The United States fell behind other countries in its broadband Internet penetration, said Troy Knecht, business manager for D&E Communications Inc.'s wireless services. The use of wireless technology could help improve broadband distribution, he said.

D&E Communications Inc. of Ephrata, Lancaster County, added the sector in January. The firm plans to rollout its first point-to-point wireless network, in Reading, in about three months, Knecht said. Lancaster and Harrisburg would come next. The firm is in early planning phases. It could also develop some Wi-Fi service in municipalities.

"Most service providers are wrestling with the business model, but we believe this can be viable," Knecht said.

Wide-reaching wireless-Internet service is pending, he said. The goal is a national wireless network. As with other services, Internet customers want cheaper prices, easier access and faster-loading Web pages. Wireless can do that as technology improves, Knecht said. The use of radio waves already reduces infrastructure costs, especially if the broadcast and repeating components can be co-located on existing towers, buildings and other structures.

The primary goal is to get dial-up customers to move to broadband services. That's happening at a faster pace because of technology, Knecht said.

D&E Communications had more than 33,700 broadband customers as of March, according to the company. That's a 33 percent increase over March 2006. At the same time, D&E's dial-up customers have declined by 32 percent. The similar percentages are coincidental, Knecht said, but many dial-up customers have upgraded.

Wireless trends in Central Pennsylvania include use of faster cell-phone technology to help laptop users surf the Internet on the move. The Technology Council of Central Pennsylvania considers it a priority to spread that technology, said Kelly Lewis, president and chief executive officer.

"In the next two to three years, there will be even faster download speeds," he said.

The tech council is working with phone companies and municipalities to expand next-generation wireless technology. The council had some success bringing better AT&T and Verizon infrastructure to Harrisburg, Lewis said.

The biggest obstacles are municipal restrictions and resident complaints about new cellular towers.

Municipalities should list the top sites for tower development. That would prevent clashes because companies wouldn't be throwing darts at a map, Lewis said. The other option is to co-locate new technology on municipal and emergency-communication towers. Those organizations would receive a stipend from companies for use of the property. That would broaden the reach of technology and give much-needed revenue to fire departments and other volunteer organizations.

"We need municipalities to actually help with the rollout of these wireless networks," Lewis said.