



Cut the Cord

Rural Arizona gains new methods of independence, thanks to Wi-Fi

By Gremlyn Bradley-Waddell

Most truckers who frequent the Petro Stopping Center along Interstate 10 require one other thing besides rest and a good cup of coffee: the Internet.

“We have a huge demand from truck drivers,” says Barry Olken, who manages the stop’s travel store next to the freeway in Casa Grande. “We have 300 truck spaces filled every night, and all they want to do when they get here is watch movies, listen to music or get on the Internet.”

Problem is, doing just that is not usually possible in rural areas of the state such as Casa Grande. The cost to lay wire cable is rather prohibitive in those areas, and some Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity) access providers have been dodgy at best. Olken says the last service for which the truck stop sold Internet access cards left customers high and dry. He even had to hang signs in his store apologizing for the inconvenience.

But truck drivers rolling into Casa Grande as well as plenty of other folks in the rural southeastern quadrant of the state may rest easier knowing that the Digital Divide will soon be much less divisive. Reliable Wi-Fi access is coming soon, thanks to the Pinal-Gila Regional Wi-Fi Partnership.

The public-private initiative, which receives no taxpayer funds, is seeing to it that a wireless, high-speed Internet network is implemented in that area. The state-contracted

Wi-Vod Corp., formerly based in Virginia but soon to be headquartered in Casa Grande, is installing the technology before staying on as the service provider.

“Eloy’s first” for service, says Allan Meiusi, Wi-Vod’s solutions architect who now calls Casa Grande home. “Then Maricopa and then Casa Grande,” as well as the Picacho Peak area by roughly the end of spring.

More To Come

And that’s just the beginning. Next on the list are Dudleyville, Winkelman, Hayden, Florence, Coolidge, San Manuel, Oracle, Mammoth, Apache Junction and Queen Creek. The goal is those communities will be served by fall, Meiusi says. After that, Globe, Miami and the Tonto Basin should get access by early 2009.

“We’re going to places that are underserved or not served at all by broadband access,” Meiusi notes, adding that serving such populations always has been a main thrust of the company. Those communities are “working with limited budgets, with limited tax bases.”

And he points out these are really the kinds of places appropriate for Wi-Fi. The system always was meant to provide a low-cost means of wireless connectivity for people who wouldn’t be able to access it through other means. Wi-Fi is not as suitable in markets saturated with other

Internet service options, such as those in some of the state's larger cities, he says.

Although he couldn't disclose any details, Meiusi notes discussions are underway regarding Wi-Vod contracting with other Arizona counties to do very similar projects. "There are three more counties that we're close to" reaching agreements, he says.

If Wi-Vod or even Meiusi's name sounds familiar, it may be because of the success they have had in the eastern Arizona mining town of Superior. Upon the formation of an earlier public-private initiative, the Pinal Regional Wi-Fi Partnership, Wi-Vod was contracted to get a wireless network up and running in the community that has seen its economy ebb and flow with the commodities markets. The project was essentially the company's pilot program in Arizona. Funding came from a variety of sources, including \$270,000 from a U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Business Enterprise Grant and \$25,000 from the town itself.

Superior Pioneers

Rosalyn Boxer, director of special projects for the Arizona Department of Commerce, says Superior has about 100 or so customers using the \$30-per-month Wi-Fi subscription service that was launched in June 2007. While that may not sound like much, she stresses those numbers are pretty good. "There are actually only 1,300 water bills, so that means there are actually only 1,300 households," she adds. She also credits the new access with creating about a half-dozen new jobs.

Meiusi also says he's quite pleased with the progress so far in Superior. To be in about 7 percent of the market at this point is great. He expects even more customers after others see what Wi-Fi can do for them and the cost savings it can provide. For example, he points to the savings in time and fuel alone when a community college student takes an online class rather than driving miles away to a classroom for one course.

Those kinds of things haven't been lost on Pinal County residents, its board of supervisors or entities such as Central Arizona College, another partner in the initiative along with truck stops such as Petro. "Pinal County 'gets' it," Meiusi says. "Pinal County leadership is amazingly ahead of the state."

Heather Murphy, communications director of Pinal County, says workshops and training sessions about Wi-Fi are available to all residents, current business owners and potential entrepreneurs. "It's not just putting technology in a place and walking away," she notes, adding, "I would say that all of rural Arizona is anxious for technology to level the playing field."

In fact, it's probably the economic development component that's of the utmost importance to Pinal County residents, she says. Plenty of people in the "copper corridor" are trained, skilled employees but because of market conditions, they may be out a job. "They want to work, they have skills to offer," she says.

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Allan Meiusi, Wi-Vod's solutions architect


Wi-Fi access will give them the ability to start and grow businesses and give entire communities the chance to reinvent themselves. She cites the myriad outdoor recreation activities available in the county, including hiking, camping and seasonal hunting along the San Pedro River, as potential springboards for new businesses. "It'll allow those communities to redefine themselves and share their rich history," Murphy says.

'Smart Corridor'

While Wi-Fi is still fairly new to the outlying areas, it isn't an unheard proposition in a few areas. As early as 2001 in Graham County, there was a public agency network available exclusively for public officials and first responders, says Galen Updike, telecommunications development manager for the state Government Information Technology Agency. That came about thanks to some bright, early adapters and lots of teamwork.

Also, when Gov. Janet Napolitano about five years ago asserted the importance of improved telecommunications throughout rural areas, Updike says that meant deploying broadband and making it available to businesses and individuals.

"One of the first charges when I took this job was to make (the CANAMEX) corridor a 'smart corridor'" he recalls, referring to the highways that connect Canada to Mexico through rural areas of Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Nevada and Utah. The result was a successful, one-year pilot program funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that provided Wi-Fi to a 30-mile area along Interstate 19 in southern Arizona – and it continues to provide that service today.

Wi-Vod, wouldn't you know, was the contractor. 

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