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Wi-Fi 'cloud' to cover county

Many likely to benefit from wireless Internet network to blanket all of Pinal by 2009

By MELISSA ST. AUDE, Staff Writer

November 23, 2007

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The digital divide in Pinal County will soon be a bit smaller.

In a regional initiative aimed at improving connectivity into the far, rural reaches of the county, officials hope to cover all of Pinal County with a Wi-Fi "cloud" by the end of 2009. The network would allow residents, for a fee, the ability to connect to the Internet from their homes, cars, offices or anywhere within the county, even from the middle of a cotton field.

Some communities in the county do not have Internet connectivity or only have dial-up connectivity. Implementing Wi-Fi infrastructure would solve that problem and would benefit businesses throughout the county, said David Snider, chairman of the Pinal County Board of Supervisors.

"In Pinal County, connectivity has always been spotty," Snider said. "There are a variety of rates of speed and capacity depending on where you are in the county. Certainly in Casa Grande, residents are able to enjoy DSL and wireless services, but we still have some places in the county that have no connectivity at all. Bringing connectivity to residents has been left to providers."

The Pinal County Regional Wi-Fi Partnership unites several groups with varied interests, resources and goals, but all hope to strengthen the region's communication infrastructure. Members of the committee include representatives from Pinal County, several municipalities, Central Arizona Regional Economic Development Foundation, the Governor's Information Technology Agency, the state Department of Commerce and Wi-VOD

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Communications, the company that developed the Wi-Fi network for the town of Superior.

Although county officials are involved in bringing the plan to reality, they will not operate the new service as a utility.

"For that, we are looking to the private sector," Snider said. "It is not Pinal County's intent to operate a Wi-Fi network. The county will be a consumer."

Partnership member Andrew Clegg of the economic foundation said that Superior, whose Wi-Fi network was completed last spring, was used as a model in developing Pinal County's network.

"Going in this as a collaboration and identifying the key partners early is the benefit of the Superior model," Clegg said. "Getting the stakeholders involved has been a big benefit."

Making Wi-Fi available countywide would not only attract businesses and telecommuters to rural parts of the county, it would also benefit existing businesses by allowing for greater efficiency when employees are working out of the office, he said.

"For example, let's say a real estate agent is showing a house in Eloy. If a client wants to make an offer, the agent needs to go back to the office to print the paperwork," Clegg said. "With a Wi-Fi network, the agent would be able to connect to the Internet from their laptop and print the paperwork for the client, eliminating the need to go to the office."

He added that businesses - large, small and home-based - benefit from fast Internet connections and several studies, including one based on Superior, demonstrate the beneficial economic impact a Wi-Fi network can have on a community.

The partnership has received a \$190,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Snider said the cost to taxpayers for developing the infrastructure would be minimal.

"We're hopeful of doing this with a minimum amount of taxpayer money," Snider said. "We are working with the private sector for solutions and hope to have grants. Wi-VOD is also looking at options."

Clegg added that the cost of implementing Wi-Fi is generally less expensive than other types of high-speed communications.

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"With Wi-Fi, you don't need to lay cable, so the infrastructure costs are less," he said.

Implementing the network will begin in Eloy early next year and technicians will work their way north and east until the entire county is covered - a process that should take about 14 months, Snider said.

"It is my fervent hope that as we unroll this and as it comes to pass, it will improve the quality of life for the residents of Pinal County and that people are no longer disadvantaged by their zip codes," Snider said.

Getting Connected

The cost: The Pinal County Regional Wi-Fi Partnership has received a \$190,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the cost to taxpayers for developing the infrastructure is said to be minimal.

Implementation: Building the Wi-Fi network is expected to begin in Eloy early next year and technicians plan to work their way north and east until the entire county is covered - a process that should take about 14 months.

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Reader Opinions:

▶ **Joe Bidwell**

Nov, 26 2007

By saying 'the whole county' will be covered, I hope they are including the rural housing in the Park Link/Hwy 79 area. It took us five years just to get telephone service and we now use satellite for Internet.

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