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Wi-Fi bringing broadband to Arizona's small towns

By Jack Gillum

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SUPERIOR — Around the bend of Picketpost Mountain, there's more to see amid the rural homes, flat-topped mountains and relics of a mining town.

Dozens of little antennas — attached to churches, schools and even a resident's home — are laying the foundation for economic sustainability by bringing Superior high-speed, wireless Internet connectivity.

The effort is part of a Pinal County effort to give broadband access to smaller communities. Eloy, which is about an hour's drive northwest of Tucson, is next to get the service, in April 2008.

Rural areas have few or no options for high-speed Internet access, said Heather Murphy, a Pinal County spokeswoman.

"What resources you have in the city are very different than what you have in the county," she said.

So that's where a wireless solution may come in handy: While a citywide "mesh" network still requires an initial, high-speed Internet connection to the town, service is delivered over the air to

customers — rather than digging trenches or modifying existing, wired infrastructure.

"Think of it as the town going from tin can and string to the largest opportunity to be the funkier town in the nation," said Allan Meiusi of Wi-Vod, the company performing the installations.

A few high-speed Internet providers, including Comcast Corp. and Cox Communications, said they had no plans to expand service into other areas. Cox said it is expanding service to Florence, which is on the way to Superior from Tucson, but that's it.

Qwest Communications, the state's biggest phone company, doesn't offer its high-speed digital subscriber line Internet service in many rural areas, including Superior.

Remote locations can make it hard to lay the "backbone" for such high-speed networks, Internet-access firms said.

"It's very expensive to build to those communities," said Kelle Maslyn, a Comcast spokeswoman.

Earlier this month, Tucson's government decided not to move forward with plans to ask for bids on a wireless system here.

Wi-Vod shrugged off suggestions that the Wi-Fi network is simply there to imitate the novelty of Internet access at Starbucks. It said high-speed access is crucial to the small towns' economic survival.

"The talent pool needs to stay in rural America," Meiusi said. "This isn't Wi-Fi for the sake of Wi-Fi."

The funding for the public-private partnership came from several contributions, including a \$190,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

It's not free, either. Wi-Vod charges \$29.95 a month for up to 4 megabits-per-second broadband, which is roughly comparable to what's offered by other services in Tucson or Phoenix. That doesn't include a \$150 setup fee, the company's rate card shows.

By comparison, satellite-based broadband Internet access, offered nationwide by providers including HughesNet and WildBlue, starts at about \$50 a month but does not include the cost of installation and equipment.

One Superior resident, Harold Hager, got the service for free, but with a catch. He had to install a wireless "access point" on the side of his house, but for a good reason: It's the highest, and thus most accessible, point in the neighborhood.

Hager, a retired electrician, said he was waiting for high-speed Internet access because, he said simply, "dial-up is just so slow."

Superior was identified as an initial trial area, Murphy said. Part of the planning includes not only giving people "good-quality access" to the Internet but also "coaching people to take advantage" of it.

Several other Arizona cities have Wi-Fi plans or existing wireless networks in place, according to a report from Muniwireless.com. They include Tempe, Chandler, Sahuarita, Yuma and Mesa.

Pinal County plans to expand wireless access to the Interstate 10 corridor from Red Rock to Casa Grande, as well as to eastern Pinal County.

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