

Homeland Security Grant Gives Southern Arizona Wireless Capabilities

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By Adam Kress
akress@bizjournals.com

The area between Tucson and the Mexican border isn't exactly the most technologically advanced place in the world, but a stretch of highway between Rio Rico and Green Valley is about to change that.

Thanks to a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, a 30-mile stretch of Interstate 19 South of Tucson is about to become "unwired." The corridor will be equipped with wireless fidelity, or Wi-Fi, capability. The system is being designed for use by first responders, but later will be available to border agents and those who live and work near the highway.

The grant was given to the Arizona Division of Emergency Management in the fall of 2004. The Arizona Telecommunications and Information Council is overseeing the implementation of the technology.

Oris Friesen, project coordinator for ATIC, said the technology will give ambulance crews and other first responders high-speed Internet access from their vehicles even as they travel along at up to 80 miles per hour.

For example, an emergency medical technician could relay streaming video of a patient over the Internet in real time, so that upon arrival at a hospital, doctors there could be better prepared for treatment.

"We're placing wireless nodes at rest stops and on some buildings close to the highway," he said. "Our big challenge is where to put them because they rely on a clear line-of-sight." Friesen said about one-third of the 30-mile stretch is completed. The entire project is expected to be complete in the next few months.

Chief Mike Foster of the Rio Rico Fire Department said the Wi-Fi network will significantly help communication in times of emergency.

"We needed to increase our ability to communicate in the field," he said. "Having mobile voice and high-speed Internet access in our mobile units on the highways delivers what we are looking for."

This new, expansive "hot-spot" also will be a help in dealing with border issues — a major challenge in southern Arizona where illegal immigrants flood over the U.S. border. Friesen said the grant was not specifically designed for border uses, but border agents will have access to it.

"The border agents will have Wi-Fi capability in their vehicles in the next few months, and the two border security checkpoints along I-19 lie in the 30-mile Wi-Fi zone," Friesen said. "We want to eventually extend it to cover the border, and the border agents are excited about that possibility."

Aside from being used by police, fire and border personnel, the company supplying the Wi-Fi technology hopes to also create customers out of residents and nearby businesses. WI-VOD, a Virginia company specializing in Wi-Fi networking solutions, has worked with ATIC on the grant project, but WI-VOD will have the rights to sell access to the network once it's completed.

Allan Meiusi, chief executive of WI-VOD, said his company has created Wi-Fi networks at truck stops and travel plazas in about 40 states, but this project takes that concept to a higher level.

"I don't think there's another project of this kind for first-responders," he said. But the longer-term goal for WI-VOD is to create a customer base in the sparsely populated area between Tucson and the Mexican border. The 30-mile stretch on I-19 may only be the beginning.

"The people down there are very underserved," Meiusi said. "We'll probably start retail sales by the end of April, but our first priority is completing the network for the first-responders." Meiusi said the cost of the high-speed service probably would average about \$40 per month. He added that it's possible a few WI-VOD employees could be based in southern Arizona in the next year or two.

Friesen said the Arizona Division of Emergency Management has not applied for any more Department of Homeland Security Information Technology and Evaluation Program grants, but it may in the future to extend the network's reach.

I-19 from the Mexican border to Tucson is one small stretch of the CANAMEX Corridor. The route — designed for freight, tourist travel and increased telecom access — continues on to Phoenix, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City and north through Idaho and Montana into Canada.

Arizona Telecommunications and Information Council: www.researchedge.com/atic
U.S. Department of Homeland Security: www.dhs.gov
WI-VOD: www.wi-vod.com

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Adam Kress
Reporter
The Business Journal – Phoenix
(602) 308-6519