

Wireless in New Salem? Pilot program has limited range, bugs to work out, but it's putting rural dwellers in high-speed world

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NEW SALEM -- There's been a glow on Main Street lately. It's a blue glow from laptops outdoors some evenings, in cars parked in front of the New Salem Library, and from residents like Bill Lafferty walking along the street trying to get reception from the wireless network that's begun a year-long test by Pioneer Valley Connect and Berkshire Connect.

The 'connects,' as they're called, have been working for years trying to make high-speed Internet available to everyone, regardless of how remote their location in western Massachusetts. But this state-funded beta test is available to only about half a dozen users in a half-mile area in the center of town. New Salem was one of three communities chosen from 15 that applied based on proposals from local committees.

'It's been a little bumpy to start with,' said Andy Chase, one of a six-member panel set up last winter to apply for the study, who, like most of its members, lives outside the service area. 'We want to make sure people understand this is a work in progress.'

With late September installation of the 2.4-gigahertz wireless system -- which uses two antennas atop a Town Hall annex and a private home that used to be part of New Salem Academy -- problems began to surface.

'Results were sort of disappointing,' said Mary-Ellen Kennedy, chairwoman of the committee which had estimated about 30 subscribers -- including town offices, the firehouse and library -- could be hooked up in a half-mile area near the town center. 'We thought it would go down most of the way.'

Lafferty's wife, Kim Noyes, said that until bugs are worked out, 'We're one house too far away. Bill can use his laptop one house down, so he can stand outside with his laptop. The only problem is winter in New England.'

Kennedy says that in addition to people trying laptops outdoors or parked outside the library beyond its three-day-a-week schedule, committee members tried walking around the town common with a laptop and receiving antenna mounted atop a 16-foot pole a couple of weeks ago to check the signal.

'Fortunately it was a beautiful day,' said Kennedy, who bumped into resident Dorothy Johnson while she was out there with the exciting news that she'd just gotten her wireless connection to work at her house.

The problem was a large plant in the window which had been blocking the signal.

She moved it the way some neighbors -- like composer Steven Schoenberg, who's had to bring his laptop to Amherst to upload music files quickly -- wish they could move trees in their front yard.

'I'm just a novice at it, but I'm expecting great things,' said Johnson, who promised she won't make 'Small Town, High Speeds' as her next in a series of original musical comedies she's written for town productions.

With years of only having a dial-up connection, she said, she didn't even bother using the computer.

'It just sits there,' she said. 'I used to sit there bravely and say, 'I'm in no hurry. But it's not true &. There is a definite difference. Somebody was telling me about getting into the British Library and being able to turn the pages of Jane Austen's original manuscripts.'

But she added, 'The people who don't have it are envious, so I don't like to rub it in too much.'

David Van Iderstine, a software engineer who lives within 200 yards of one of the antennas, says it's provided him with lightning-like speeds of up to 2,200 kilobits per second --'way, way, way, way faster' than the satellite system he's been paying for over the past 10 years.

Without cable TV or high-speed Internet in town, he added, 'There's a built-in frustration from get-go. For years, there's been talk, a promise of some solutions that didn't pan out. So when this came to town, there were really high hopes & but it didn't pan out where we had a launch date, we turn it on and WOW!

'That didn't happen. There's more work to do. It hasn't been a cakewalk.'

Van Iderstine said that with use of small external receivers that are now being tested, the community network is gradually being expanded, and, theoretically, the range could extend two miles, across Route 202 to North Main Street, depending on terrain.

But after telecommuting for 15 years with only dial-up service, he called a high-speed connection 'absolutely essential. Our (federal) government should be taking the lead on this, like it did with rural electrification in the 1930s. Lots more people could be telecommuting, running Internet businesses, whatever.'

Using the small, \$150 so-called 'smart' receiving devices, Kennedy said, committee members have been working with residents to tweak the system, plugging them into home computers, and exploring whether the problem is placement of the individual computer, as with Johnson, or with the internal network, as in the town-hall annex directly under the transmitter. In some cases, the problem may be the quality of the computer's internal receiver, she said.

'This a pilot,' Kennedy said. 'It's free, but we don't know what's going to happen afterwards, so people are reluctant to spend money.'

'If this was easy to do, somebody would have done it already,' she said.

Leverett, Leyden, Shutesbury, Warwick and Wendell were among the other towns that applied for the test project. Worthington and Florida were also chosen, each using a variation of wireless technology that was originally designed for indoor networks. With a grant from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, each makes use of a formerly used T-1 connection paid for by a state Department of Public Health grant -- a connection that local committees will be asked to pay for if they want the network to continue past next fall.

Pioneer Valley Connect spokeswoman Jessica Atwood said, 'This is a test of technologies not traditionally used in rural areas. Some people could call it almost a hostile environment because of the technologies. We're still in the launch phase and establishing what the networks are.'

The lessons learned, through tweaking and evaluations at the end of the year-long test, may be incorporated into solutions funded through a \$25 million Massachusetts Broadband Initiative proposed by the Patrick administration to attract private construction of high-speed connections in 32 unserved western Massachusetts communities by 2010.

George 'Chip' Brodeur, the technical consultant for the three test projects, said, 'Very up front, we said we're looking for some very technology-tolerant people, because we knew it wasn't going to be easy.'

'Any of the grouching we've gotten, is nothing more than a barometer of the frustration folks in all these towns have about their inability to get broadband. It may be just 100 feet from my house, but I still can't get it, and that must be very frustrating.'

'We'll keep on plugging.'

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