

The business of BROADBAND

By Bryan Gentry
ggentry@newsadvance.com
(434) 385-5537

For years, Vickie Barker had to start downloading programs for her insurance company in Brookneal at 5 p.m. as she left the office.

That's if she needed the download the next day. She'd go back into the office at DeJarnette Insurance later in the evening to make sure the download was going well, or to install the program if it had finished downloading.

Waiting for downloads was actually just one problem. Barker's company uses the Internet to process customer applications and payments. There were times that her connection ran so slowly that the computers on the other end sometimes terminated the connection.

"I had to do something. I just didn't have a choice," Barker said.

DeJarnette Insurance was just one company in Brookneal that struggled

with a low-speed connection. About six years ago,

WIRELESS

Want to find a place to surf the Web without hassling with cables? The Region 2000 Technology Council keeps a list of free and paid hot spots in the region. Find the list at www.region2000.org/tech/initiatives_hotspots.php.

Campbell County officials heard that existing businesses in Brookneal had difficulty finding affordable high-speed connections, said Mike Davidson, the county's economic development director.

BROADBAND

Bandwidth refers to the speed at which you can transmit data. Broadband refers to data access that transmits much faster than older, phone-based dial-up systems.

"There were actually folks down there who would have to get up and go down there at three in the morning (and) fire up their computer" to start a download, Davidson said.

The county hired a consultant to study the existing level of broadband in Brookneal and see if more were needed. After the study determined that access was nowhere near sufficient, the county began working to find ways to bring access to Brookneal.

Campbell County, as well as other groups in the region and the state, are still doing likewise. There are multiple entities trying to increase the ability for people and businesses to access high-speed Internet.

They see that as an essential part of fostering entrepreneurial efforts and attracting business expansion in Central Virginia.

Broadband taking over

Infrastructure has always been able to make or break a deal when businesses decide where to locate or expand.

And it used to be that businesses mainly looked for highways, water and sewer systems and other physical facilities.

Now, "more important than all of those is broadband," said Lee Cobb, director of the Region 2000 economic development partnership.

"They (businesses) are not going to a location where they don't have broadband," Cobb said. "That means fiber in most cases, not wireless. ... I don't know how you're going to compete without it."

High-speed Internet access is critical for some businesses that perform international transactions. "They do business all over the world, and they send files to Richmond, and to France," Cobb said.

Broadband connections are becoming more important for home offices and small businesses, too.

"There is a large number of folks that are now able to work at home," Davidson said. "They could be working for corporations in Chicago or New York or Florida ... as long as

REPORTING YOURS

Want to tell the state about your own access to broadband Internet? Find the Center for Innovative Technology's survey form at www.cit.org/broadband.

Please see **BROADBAND**, Page 8

Broadband

From page 7

they have broadband.”

“That’s the most glaring need that we see in Campbell County, as well as providing for smaller businesses that need affordable high speed connections,” he said.

“Any major industry has the ability and the resources available to take care of their fiber connections and broadband connectivity,” Davidson said. “It’s the smaller businesses that can’t afford to pay the thousands of dollars a month to tap into the fiber connections to get broadband connectivity.”

Where is it (not)?

There are multiple ways for homes and businesses to get broadband access in Central Virginia. Several cable companies offer Internet access, and Waynesboro-based nTelos provides some DSL access in the region.

Region 2000’s Technology Council reports more than 50 wireless hot spots in the area. Also, JetBroadband is preparing a tower to provide wireless access at the Appomattox Center for Business and Commerce.

Several companies have built fiberoptic networks through the region, and nTelos plans to begin offering fiber-to-the-home in the Cornerstone development in Lynchburg next year.

With all this access available, local leaders are trying to find out where it is available, so they can then know where it isn’t.

The Region 2000 Local Government Council is updating a study it first completed about three years ago to map out the current broadband deployment.

“We have a lot of the county and city leaders around the area very interested,” said Brandon Turner, a council staff assistant. “It’s a way to know what we have and where it is.”

“It’s so we can help, hopefully, areas that are in need of broadband service, and get those areas covered,” Turner said.

The new study was begun just recently. Turner said it will probably not be completed until May 2008.

Davidson has started a wide-spread study of broadband availability throughout Campbell County. He said he’s looking at every kind of access, including the use of cell phones to connect computers to the Internet. He hopes the study, which he expects to finish in June, will set the stage for increasing high-speed access where it is needed.

There is also a statewide effort to measure broadband access. The Center for Innovative Technology has been helping the Commonwealth collect data from Internet users about broadband deployment.

This online survey allows users themselves to report service gaps that might go undetected otherwise.

Karen Jackson, director of the Office of Teleworks Promotion and Broadband Assistance, said the online survey is intended to

find service gaps, but many respondents so far are also reporting on the speed or quality of access.

Brookneal gone wireless

After studying the needs of Brookneal six years ago, Campbell County learned that broadband access was deemed insufficient, Davidson said.

But, because of the town’s low population, none of the service providers wanted to invest money in expanding their infrastructure there.

“The only way for it to work there was to do a public/private partnership,” Davidson said.

The county’s Industrial Development Authority built a hardware infrastructure and then contracted with a wireless company to provide service to the town.

“After we got our system up and running, Sprint decided that since someone has demonstrated a need here, they rolled out more DSL in the area,” Davidson said. “DSL was more affordable than wireless broadband.”

“We went from a small town that was struggling to get any type of high-speed Internet connection, to, after we did the study and did some work on it ... people realized that we had potential for affordable high-speed Internet connectivity,” Davidson said.

“I think Brookneal can get the lowest cost broadband in the state,” he said.

Access to the broadband wireless service in Brookneal costs about \$29.95 a month.



Head
4
40
41
20
6

Head
22
38
28
10
5

Head
6
15
6

Head
24
30
18
13
4

Head
14
39
38
22
7

Head
42
82
63
20
4

Head
33
33
15
2

Head
46
69
39
12
1

Head
15
35
22
4

Head
23
76
13
3

STOCKS ON PAPER
The News & Advance