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## Wireless Web coverage may widen in Lynchburg area

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A wireless high-speed Internet provider plans to roll out its service in the Lynchburg area in 2010.

In some rural corners of the region, it could be people's first chance to have high-speed Internet. In other areas, it would give people another way to have broadband Internet access.

DigitalBridge Communications, which already offers a wireless Internet service in Appomattox, is leasing frequencies from three local schools. Next year the Ashburn-based company will start installing radios to provide service in Lynchburg and parts of nearby counties, said executive vice president Bill Wallace.

Meanwhile, Congress has approved a grant to help Liberty University research more ways to use local airwaves so more people can use mobile high-speed Internet.

"This obviously is going to have a huge impact on those underserved areas, said Lee Beaumont, LU's director of auxiliary services. "Part of the study will be what needs to be in place to get coverage out into those areas."

In 2008, LU and Virginia School of the Arts announced that they wanted to lease out some educational broadcast licenses in the Lynchburg area and sought a company to provide wireless Internet access in the region.

That caught the attention of DigitalBridge, which had just launched its WiMAX service in Appomattox.

WiMAX is a “fourth generation” wireless technology similar to WiFi networks in homes or libraries, but it reaches farther and is more secure. It gives users download speeds of three megabits per second for DigitalBridge’s basic \$30-per-month service, Wallace said.

That speed is average in the Lynchburg area, according to a Communications Workers of America report earlier this year that used about 900 Internet speed tests.

DigitalBridge was one of several companies to bid on the LU and VSA project. Clearwire, a mobile broadband company that focuses on large metropolitan areas, was another.

The schools awarded the contract to DigitalBridge a few weeks ago, Beaumont said. DigitalBridge also is leasing airwaves from Desmond T. Doss Junior Academy, Wallace said, giving the company 67.5 megahertz of spectrum in the region.

“It’s a very large amount of bandwidth that will enable us to provide high-speed access to the community,” he said.

DigitalBridge can use the frequencies as far south as Gretna, north past Charlottesville and west past Roanoke. The company is deciding where to mount radios and provide service. Wallace said the company likes to see about 2,000 potential customers within the range of one transmitter. The range varies with terrain and other factors.

Wallace said it is possible that the company could install enough transmitters for WiMAX to penetrate the entire city of Lynchburg and the immediate surrounding areas. The company plans to apply for stimulus money to build infrastructure in underserved rural parts of nearby counties. The federal stimulus bill contains \$7.2 billion for broadband deployment.

The stimulus money would be separate from a \$220,000 grant included in the federal 2010 budget, which President Barack Obama signed Wednesday. U.S. Rep. Tom Perriello, D-5th District, announced that funding Tuesday.

The grant will help LU conduct a feasibility study on broadband deployment in the Lynchburg region, helping students, teachers and small businesses have more broadband access. Beaumont said the study could explore ways to get mobile broadband access in underserved parts of the region and on Greater Lynchburg Transit Company buses.

Nick VanWingerden, an information technology project manager with LU, said it is significant that Lynchburg will get 4G WiMAX service at the same time as, and even before, some larger cities. “As metro areas like Charlotte and Las Vegas and Phoenix build up WiMAX, ... it really helps to elevate Lynchburg and surrounding communities to attract college students and employers because it puts Lynchburg on par with these larger cities,” he said.

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