



Entire county to get wireless Internet

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A Lansing broadband company is preparing to narrow the "digital divide" between the technological "haves and have-nots" with an affordable countywide wireless Internet system.

Muskegon will be the first county in the nation to have border-to-border, high-speed, wireless Internet service, business and government officials said.

Arialink Broadband received a \$2.2 million federal grant to provide wireless Internet connections in five low- to moderate-income rural communities -- Cedar Creek, Egelston, Holton and Moorland townships and the village of Lakewood Club.

While it's true anyone with a phone line can connect to the Internet, this program would provide high-speed broadband service that makes the Internet faster and more useful.

Five other technology companies competed for the grant through Muskegon County and the Michigan Broadband Development Authority.

The proposed \$4.1 million countywide "microcell" wireless network will be introduced with drastically reduced monthly service charges. The initial three-year price will be \$18.99 per month with a regular retail price of \$25 a month, company spokesmen said.

The new technology and pricing plan could shake up how Muskegon County is connected to the Internet, county technology officials said.

"This is going to change the face of Muskegon County," said Eduardo Bedoya, county information systems manager. A countywide wireless Internet system would provide a powerful economic development tool for the community to use in attracting businesses.

"We are the first county in the nation to have this kind of system providing service corner-to-corner of the county," Bedoya said. "This system is geared toward providing high-speed Internet connections to areas of the county not covered by other providers and at a competitive price."

County officials said they hope the government-aided wireless system will affect services and pricing of other Internet-service providers. "All consumers are going to benefit," Bedoya said.

There are two current options for high-speed Internet service in Muskegon County: Comcast High-Speed Internet and Verizon Communications' direct subscriber line, or DSL.

Neither Comcast nor Verizon provide blanket coverage of the entire county. Comcast's broadband retail price is \$42.95 a month and Verizon's DSL service is \$37.95, although both offer initial monthly discounted rates to new customers.

Where Comcast uses cable lines and Verizon telephone lines, Arialink will provide a "wireless" system that uses ultrahigh radio frequencies to transmit signals from a central station to outlying

distribution towers. Arialink proposes using 16 towers to cover the county and will fill in high-use areas with another 110 "microcell" stations, small base stations used to enhance coverage.

"Our company is not a wireless, DSL or cable company, exclusively," said Raymond Signs, Arialink vice president of operations, who is overseeing the Muskegon system development. "We use all of those platforms for whatever is the best fit for the customer or the community."

In Muskegon County, rapid deployment of high-speed Internet connections into the five targeted communities and then the entire county necessitates wireless technology, company officials said. But that is only the first step in Arialink's plans for Muskegon County, said Jason Schreiber, company president and majority owner.

Arialink's plans are to locate a service center in the metropolitan area where the company will bring in a gigabyte -- 1,000 megabytes -- fiber service on existing leased lines that are currently not being used, Signs said. That would be 250 times faster than the current 4-megabyte-per-second speed offered by Comcast.

Within two years, the company hopes to have a dozen employees in Muskegon, with technicians serving the local system. Office operations, such as technical support, will come from the company's call center in Lansing, he said.

The access point to the Internet -- called point of presence or P.O.P. -- will then be transmitted from the metro-area central office to what eventually will be 16 towers throughout Muskegon County. The tower sites and leases are now being developed, Signs said.

Those wanting the service will receive a "wireless" modem that will connect to a desktop or laptop computer.

Signs said that "wi-fi hotspots" will be established in the urban areas so users with laptop computers and "wi-fi" connection cards can be mobile in those zones. Arialink customers will be able to move anywhere the county system allows, he said.

Signs said the initial focus will be the five rural communities, with customers in Egelston and Moorland townships being online by the first of the year and then service expanding to the north. By the fall of 2006, all five communities will have the system available, which is 30 percent of the total land area of the county, he said.

Arialink then will begin working on providing wireless Internet service to the other cities and townships in the county by the end of 2007. A particular emphasis will be in downtown Muskegon and the rest of the city, Signs said.

In the coming years, Arialink will expand its fiber optic cable presence in Muskegon. The first expansion might be connecting the downtown service center to the 16 tower sites.

"The future is fiber because that is going to bring you bandwidth," Signs said. "If you build the bandwidth, it will be used."

In receiving its federal Community Development Block Grant through Muskegon County and a low-interest loan from the Michigan Broadband Development Authority, Arialink provided a proposal that included a \$262,000, three-year marketing plan. Within 36 months, the company estimates that it can capture 5 percent of the Internet service market in Muskegon County.

The county's Bedoya said it's important to market the service to people without computers or technological savvy. He said he wants to work with community-based nonprofit groups and local businesses to find ways to get computers to households that don't have them or cannot afford them.

Part of the strategy county officials would like Arialink to employ would be working with institutions such as Muskegon Community College to put on free Internet demonstration events.

Connecting the unconnected can change people's lives, Bedoya said.