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Published 9/25/05

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## Investing in The Internet Makes Sense

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

High-speed Internet service, or broadband, as it is generally called, is no longer a luxury. Like electricity, it has become a vital part of life in the 21st century.

Companies use broadband to differentiate themselves from competitors and reduce their cost of doing business. Take Wal-Mart and The Home Depot, for instance. Their computers are connected to their hundreds of stores by broadband.

If their automated warehouses sense a store is about to run out of an item, the computerized warehouses will make sure the item is put on a truck and sent to that store. Both stores' suppliers are wired into their central computers by broadband to ensure the warehouses never run out of stock. In turn, the suppliers are connected to their manufacturers by broadband, and so on.

The cost of broadband keeps coming down, as does the price for computer technology, so smaller companies can afford to get on the bandwagon. It wasn't long ago that only the largest banks in the world could offer their customers online access and bill payment services. Today, these services are offered free by even the smallest community banks.

Not having broadband is like not having electricity. And that is why rural, sparsely populated states like Vermont and New Hampshire will continue to be at a disadvantage -- both commercially and as desirable places for "Creative Economy" professionals to relocate -- unless they can find a way to help expand broadband access throughout their communities.

One of the technologies that has been touted to meet the challenge is wireless technology, in which transmitters at the user's home beam information to a tower that is connected to the Internet. The wireless signal takes the place of cable or fiber-optic lines, which become prohibitively expensive in rural areas.

Alas, after a year and a half of great expectations, the deployment of this older wireless technology has made little headway in the Upper Valley -- in some areas it works, in others it does not. It seems the technology is not yet ready for prime time.

Which is why Morrow and Umatilla counties of eastern Oregon should be of interest

to Vermont and New Hampshire. These 600 square miles of largely rural country (not one traffic light graces Morrow County!) have become one of the world's leading broadband hot spots. Kids in school, police officers in their cruisers, businesses and residences can now use the Internet whenever they want.

Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* recently used his laptop computer there to get e-mail, and download video at speeds faster than a T-1 line, while driving mile after mile at 70 mph. (A T-1 line, in case you are not familiar with it, is the standard business connection for high-speed Internet. One reason broadband means high speed is because it offers a wider path for the transmission of signals. The wider the path, the faster the transmission speed. A dial-up connection is like a three-foot garden path; a T-1 line like a four-lane highway.)

All this came about because of a public-private partnership that set up the largest wireless computer network in the country, a Wi-Fi network covering all 600 square miles, and it is available at no cost to anyone who wants to use it.

Perhaps Vermont and New Hampshire planners should check out the usefulness of eastern Oregon's universal Internet technology to our area.

In the meantime, there is a small step that could alleviate some of the broadband shortage in the Twin States: putting wireless hubs in libraries that already have broadband connections.

The library in my hometown of Reading, Vt., did just that two months ago, and the library's fast cable connection is now available to anyone with a wireless card in a laptop computer -- these cards are now given away with laptops, which have become commodity items themselves.

For around \$400 (not an inconsequential sum for this small library) Reading has given its citizens who can only use dial-up a bridge to the future. Tony Pikramenos, Reading's town librarian, who showed real leadership in getting the wireless hub installed, tells me that in the three months the library has had the wireless hub, he has seen as many people using the computer as he used to see in an entire year. Talk about a good return on taxpayer investment!

There are 192 public libraries in Vermont, 115 of them have broadband installed, but only a dozen have wireless hubs. For around \$40,000, which is what it would cost to put in wireless hubs in the remaining 103 broadband equipped libraries, Vermont could make a measurable improvement in providing broadband access to its more rural citizens, and increase the value of libraries as a community asset.

Using population as a guide for estimating New Hampshire's expenditure to do likewise, its cost might be around \$80,000. I'd say these are expenditures most taxpayers would want to back without hesitation. What do you think?

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