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Going For Broadband

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

Nothing better illustrates the transparency and commercial irrelevancy of the “border” between New Hampshire and Vermont than the provision of broadband service to the Vermont towns of South Windsor and Reading by Wavecomm, a Lebanon-based company whose broadband-by-wireless services were made possible by a recent grant funded by Vermont's taxpayers.

The grant is also a tribute to the farsightedness of the Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission, which recognized that the only way to get broadband service to these sparsely populated rural Vermont communities was through a company on the other side of the “border.”

Both Vermont and New Hampshire are trying to get new businesses and individuals who appreciate living in these beautiful states to move there. It is a race neither can afford to lose if they are to maintain a standard of living commensurate with their natural beauty.

But it is a race they are guaranteed to lose if they do not keep up with today's fast-evolving communications technologies. Without seamless, always-on wireless and broadband connections to the rest of the country and world, the region increasingly will become an economic backwater as everyday technology marches on.

Wireless telephone vendors already have introduced telephones that automatically switch from cellular to Internet (to let consumers pay lower charges) and back as they automatically select from all available connections. Within a short time, companies will assume that anyone who wants to do business with them has access to these technologies.

While many companies still mail brochures or catalogs, they are very expensive to print, out of date the day they are printed, and businesses cannot afford to wait for their arrival in the mail. If you want to do business today, you had better be prepared to send and receive voluminous material over the Internet. No wireless or broadband, no business.

The good news is both New Hampshire and Vermont recognize the importance of winning the wireless and broadband race, as I discovered in recent conversations with the officials responsible for Internet and wireless propagation within the states. Both governors, Jim Douglas of Vermont and John Lynch of New Hampshire, have publicly committed themselves to making broadband and wireless communications available to 100 percent of their citizens by 2010. Between 80 percent and 90 percent of citizens have these features already, but the rural nature of the states means the final 5 percent will be the most difficult to serve.

In Vermont, the governor has created a Cabinet-level position to handle this function, and it falls to Tom Myers, who heads up the Department of Information and Innovation, to move the state along to meet the 100 percent objective.

“In this business we need to think about building a matrix that covers entire communities, you cannot think about one community alone,” Myers told me.

In making grants Myers' agency tries to start “seed projects” that can be leveraged for entire areas. “In the Windsor-Reading area we saw the grant to Wavecomm as a seed project that was a way to spread broadband up the Upper Valley, and to begin running it up through Fairlee. There is another recent grant to Stratford that we see as a seed project, which, when it is up and running, will touch on Vershire, Fairlee, Norwich and Thetford. We think of projects that will be self-sustaining, but will also grow beyond that community.”

New Hampshire has placed the responsibility for meeting the 100 percent objective within the Department of Resources and Economic Development, and specifically under Stuart Arnett, the director of the department's Economic Development Division. (Arnett, who is also the chairman of the New Hampshire Telecommunications Development Advisory Board, announced last week that he is resigning as Economic Development director this summer to take a position with Lebanon-based GSFA Consulting, an economic development firm that participated in the development of the telecommunications board's 2003 *Internet Utilization Survey* and the 2004 report, *High-speed Internet Availability For New Hampshire Businesses*.)

The state is about to attack the rural obstacle with a project called High Speed Heroes, funded by a U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Grant. “We want to pick at least four “micro-businesses,” those with one, two or three employees, one in each of four counties, and give them a really big dose of on-site, hands-on technical assistance via consultants,” Arnett said. “We want to work with them to try and get them to be globally competitive, even though they are rurally located.”

Job creation is one objective of the grant, but “it is more about assessing best practices,” Arnett told me. “We would like to know what is holding back the companies from using these tools better, and what kind of lessons can we learn for other rural areas. These will be test sites.”

New Hampshire will launch a telephone survey next month to create a database that

will help choose the grant candidates. The selections will be announced at the state's second Governors' Telcom/Broadband Summit on Sept. 8, which is to be held at an Upper Valley location, probably in Lebanon. The telephone survey will give the state a database to work from to choose these companies, according to Arnett. It will feature a whole new track for micro-businesses to show them how to use this tool and decide who will get this technical assistance.

I will continue exploring the Upper Valley's cellular-wireless-broadband scene in my next column.

Sarwar A. Kashmeri of Reading, Vt., advises corporations on communications and marketing strategy and is a fellow of the Foreign Policy Association. This twice-monthly column explores the Upper Valley's "business climate," focusing on the issues and conditions affecting the region's economic health. Kashmeri can be reached at skashmeri@aol.com.

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