

Kitsap County envisions high-speed Internet

Governments want to provide access using fiber-optic cable owned by PUD

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POULSBO -- By early summer, a publicly built fiber-optic cable will stretch from one end of the Kitsap Peninsula to the other.

Its arrival will create a high-speed telecommunications freeway that offers the promise of economic independence.

But before this west-Sound region can become the Silicon Peninsula it dreams of becoming, someone will have to build the onramps and offramps that people will need before they can use the new system.

That so-called "last-mile" task may prove to be as daunting as the scramble to replace lost shipyard jobs and offset the effects of a lousy fishing season.

So Kitsap County and its four cities have embarked on a study to determine whether government can bring the World Wide Web home.

"This is an economic-development issue," said Poulsbo City Councilman Ed Stern, a stock and bond broker who favors municipal intervention.

A high-speed Internet system, he said, promises to give Kitsap County equal footing with cities such as Seattle in the scramble to create a climate for e-business interests.

"We're going to do everything we can at this end to see that it happens," Port Orchard Mayor Jay Weatherill said.

Bremerton Mayor Cary Bozeman is equally enthusiastic.

"We just have no option," Bozeman said. "It's the only way to attract new business."

The Kitsap Regional Coordinating Council, which consists of city and county elected officials, has started to explore the idea.

At the council's regular meeting today, staff will recommend that a consultant be hired to squeeze out the details.

"We need to know what this means to us in the governmental sector as well as to the private sector," said Mary McClure, executive director of the coordinating council.

"We need development," McClure said. "We need businesses that can thrive without a highly developed transportation system. We will always need a strong ferry connection and the bridges we now have. But the population will continue to grow and we need a stronger portion of our work force able to stay here on the peninsula.

"Fiber optics can help that happen. But do the governments really want to get into the ISP business?"

"If they do, will it be limited to the cities, or can the county play, too?"

The new cable installation is a \$4 million project financed and built by Kitsap Public Utility District No. 1.

The cable will add another link to a public telecommunication system being created by the Northwest Open Access Network, a non-profit consortium of public utility districts known as NoaNet.

NoaNet was created two years ago to help its 16 founding members keep up with the Bonneville Power Administration in its switch to fiber-optic technology as a better way to monitor and service its far-flung electrical grid.

Using this modern telecommunications technology, power managers can tell in an instant when equipment fails or sputters. Previously, it could take days.

To accomplish these same monitoring efficiencies for themselves, NoaNet members leased space on this growing Bonneville web -- and they wound up with capacity to burn.

Now this excess capacity is proving to be a communications windfall for communities outside the service areas of telephone giants such as Qwest and AT&T, said Greg Marney, NoaNet's CEO.

"So what we're doing," he said, "is taking the Internet to the hinterlands, where, for the most part, there's nobody but us and the sagebrush."

There is little sagebrush in Kitsap County.

But there can be vast distances between high-speed Internet providers, especially outside cities.

Under a withering lobbying barrage from the for-profit utilities last session, the state Legislature passed a law limiting public utility districts along the NoaNet system to the wholesale side of telecommunications.

The law may prohibit PUDs from getting into the retail business, but says nothing about cities or counties, and that loophole has not escaped Kitsap officials.

"As cities, we would provide the service no differently than we now take care of people's sewer and water needs," said Stern, the Poulsbo city councilman. "It's that simple."

"Unlike private companies, we can look at the bigger picture and amortize our investment over a longer period," he said. "What we're left with here now is a private sector that has not delivered, and our economy is suffering because of it."

Stern compares the proposal to the federal effort that brought electricity and telephone service to backcountry America and the Northwest through the Rural Electrification Act in 1936. "This opportunity is at least as momentous," he said.

"That's OK as long as access to it remains open," said Jim Kendall, president of the Washington Association of Internet Service Providers. If the municipals build that "last mile," he said, a healthy level of competition would be added to the Kitsap scene.

"But as an association, we would resist the idea of becoming a retail supplier," he said. "We want open access."