

New Internet service launched by BridgeMAXX in Appomattox

By Bryan Gentry
ggentry@newsadvance.com
Saturday, January 5, 2008

A new Internet service in Appomattox intends to bring the Web into homes and businesses faster and without wires, starting at \$28.99 a month.

DigitalBridge, a company stationed in Ashburn, hopes to launch its wireless BridgeMAXX service in Appomattox later this month. Tapping into a high-speed fiber optic line, the company will use two antennas to broadcast the Internet service to subscribers.

"We're doing the finishing touches on building our network. We're going to have two towers active in Appomattox in the next couple of weeks," said Jeff Reid, general manager for DigitalBridge's southeast region. "Then we'll be able to start our service and people will be able to place orders."

The service is expected to reach subscribers up to five miles from the broadcast points.

People can subscribe and pick up the necessary equipment at Next Generation, a local retailer in the Triangle Plaza shopping center by the intersection of Old Courthouse Road and U.S. 460 Business.

The BridgeMAXX service uses WiMAX technology, a new wireless data technology that promises higher speeds at greater distances than previous wireless networks.

DigitalBridge has started its BridgeMAXX service in Rexburg, Idaho, and Missoula, Mont., but Appomattox is the first town in Virginia to get it.

"One of the biggest reasons we chose Appomattox for our first deployment is there's a high demand there," Reid said.

"We found that people that live in larger cities have plenty of broadband options. But if you live in a small town you often don't have as many choices," he said. "So we like to bridge that gap."

The Mid-Atlantic Broadband Cooperative, a not-for-profit organization that seeks to connect rural Southside Virginia to high-speed Internet, noted a lack of options in Appomattox about two years ago.



John Wolchko, owner of Martinsville-based Kimbanet, works 160 feet high installing transmission lines and antennas on Appomattox's new communications structure Friday. Photo by Chet White

At the time, Appomattox had no DSL or cable Internet access, said Tad Deriso, general manager for Mid-Atlantic Broadband. (Since then, JetBroadband purchased the cable company that served Appomattox County and has begun providing cable Internet service.)

The Virginia Tobacco Commission offered a grant to pay for half of the capital costs. DigitalBridge was awarded the contract and grant early last year, Deriso said.

Deriso said that to his knowledge, this is the first commercial deployment of WiMAX in the commonwealth.

RAF Wireless, of Chase City, built a 192-foot tower in the Appomattox Center for Business and Commerce on Virginia 26 to broadcast the service.

Chris Crosby, owner of RAF Wireless, said it cost about \$100,000 to build, and now holds DigitalBridge's antenna that connects to Mid-Atlantic Broadband's fiber optic network.

"It's an on ramp to a highway," Crosby said.

He said that many of today's Internet applications - such as Google Earth - require much more speed than dial-up Internet access could provide. And it doesn't make sense for kids to not be able to use those applications at home, he said.

Another DigitalBridge antenna is mounted on US Cellular's tower near Appomattox County High School.

A WiMAX system can broadcast a signal carrying Internet data around 20 miles line-of-sight, Crosby said. Trees, buildings and other obstacles reduce that range, but anyone within three to five miles of the antennas should be able to get a good signal, he said.

Crosby hopes to build more towers in the area to expand the coverage.

"This is one of potentially quite a few," Crosby said. "If you build it, they will come."

Martin Printwear, a silk-screening and embroidery company at the Appomattox Center for Business and Commerce, pays nearly \$80 a month for satellite Internet service. Owner Ricky Martin said the satellite service is slow and undependable. Once, their service was down for three weeks, he said.

His company depends on Internet access, getting 90 percent of its orders online.

He's been watching the tower built in the business park in hopes of getting better Internet access.

"As soon as they get it up and running, I'll be the first customer," Martin said.

WiMAX has farther reach than WiFi

The new wireless service about to go online in Appomattox uses WiMAX, one of the newest technologies for transmitting data with radio waves.

WiMAX is different from WiFi, a more common technology used often for networks within a home or office.

Many in the industry say that WiFi is like a cordless phone, and WiMAX is like a cell phone. It has a larger signal range and increased security.

On one end of WiMAX, the Internet service provider connects a high-speed, high-bandwidth network line to an antenna. The ISP broadcasts signals from that antenna on a licensed frequency. Subscribers then pick up the signal using a modem-like antenna in their home. The device connects to a computer with an Ethernet cable.

Jeff Reid, southeast region general manager for DigitalBridge, said the BridgeMAXX service starts at \$28.99 for download speeds of two megabits per second. Customers can also subscribe to faster service plans.

"It's faster than most DSL," Reid said. "It's 10 to 20 times faster than dialup."

That speed is also faster than some cable Internet connections, Reid said, though some cable plans offer faster speeds.

Reid said the upload speed is about 500 kilobits per second, a fourth of the download speed.

The monthly service charge includes the rental fee for the modem.

According to the WiMAX Forum, a Portland, Ore., not-for-profit, WiMAX subscribers also benefit from increased security.

While it's a new technology that has not been deployed much in the U.S., its use is growing.

Sprint Nextel Corp. expects to start offering mobile WiMAX coverage this year, for example.

"It's a direct technology that offers a very, very good alternative to cable or DSL for broadband Internet," said Reid.

"Before now, most people had to get Internet from the phone company or the cable company if they wanted broadband," he said. "But WiMAX has the technology ... to provide people with an alternative broadband option."

Part of DigitalBridge's mission is to bring broadband access to communities that might miss out otherwise.

"When we increase educational opportunities, help home-based businesses or help people look at pictures of their grandchildren online, those are the fun parts of what we do," Reid said.

- Bryan Gentry