

Crossing the Digital Divide (v155)

“It takes a village...”

by Joseph Feigon
for the Observer

We've many blessings living in the country, life in rural America affords us an awareness of food production – farms with chicken, duck and guinea fowl, meadows and grassland with cattle and sheep, harbors on the coast packed with fishing boats. We have trees close by, and space to feel small and expansive at the same time.

Wireless Internet Service Providers are infrequent competitors in the dense urban environment one can shop several vendors for Internet access. This week's column is not about Net Neutrality, Internet Fast Lanes, Fiber Optics, or Content Aggregation. This week, a shared experience.

Wireless Internet is one of the few avenues geographically challenged rural communities can access the Internet and step beyond our landscape into the digitally connected world around us, whether work, study or entertainment driven, having access to “The Net” is key to survival in the 21st Century.

Enabling Internet access to smaller communities requires access points and relay points to distribute access to The Net. Fixed wireless is often “community based”, either by design or default. While one of the providers was off-line for emergency repairs recently, another segment of the network experienced a service outage.

Just before dinner hour, I get a phone call. “Can you go to Westport?” Yes, of course I can, but why. “Looks like a primary access point needs restarting, and we can't reach the store.” Evidently, they've changed their phone service to an Internet based solution, and the new owner hasn't shared cellphone information. I ask if so and so had been called? I rattle off three names and associated phone numbers within walking distance of the store. “No answer”, “Left Message”, “Out of town”. I'm getting ready to postpone dinner and head out Branscomb, then I remembered...

I called one more person, we'll call him a Hero (he is). I ask him if he's home, and if he's willing to walk down the street and hand the store owner his phone for five minutes. He had his shoes on, and two blocks down the hill to the store in no time at all. New store owner shares his cell phone, is instructed to open locked-cabinet, press button, wait, confirm blinking light, close/lock cabinet. I thanked our Hero profusely, our Network Engineer gleefully reports green lights across Westport, Internet access restored. I didn't have to drive over and back for a simple power reset.

Outages will happen (wind/snow/ice/hail/fire/flood/power): we live in the country as guests of Mother Nature. A wise man once said: “These things take time.” He was right, and more so in the country. When community works together, the Digital Divide, with a little help from our friends, becomes more accessible and more consistent.

Control the things you can and keep the surprises to a minimum.