

No more life in Internet slow lane for rural town

Friday, June 16, 2006

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

CHESTERHILL – In a highspeed cyber world, this little town has been doing its best to navigate in what amounts to an Internet horse and buggy.

Ann Horner couldn't grow her Posy Place flower shop because she didn't have a high-speed Internet connection, and dialup service is too slow to receive orders. So she has been doing it the old-fashioned way, with a telephone and expensive catalogs that eat up much of her profit.

Like residents of most Appalachian communities, she hoped the Internet would help her village overcome decades of isolation perpetuated by hilly terrain and narrow, winding roads. Only high-speed service would break through the barriers, it seemed, but it remains elusive in most of the 29 Ohio counties considered part of Appalachia.

That just changed for Horner and the other 304 Chesterhill residents, who are now rocketing into cyberspace. A grant is providing high-speed wireless service to the entire village, which is 90 miles southeast of Columbus in Morgan County.

"It's going to be a big savings to me because I can do away with FTD," she said. "And it's going to save my customers money, too."

Business owners, residents and village officials are pinning their hopes for resurrecting



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A wireless Internet antenna is mounted on the Chesterhill water tower. Residents who live within the line of sight of the tower have access to wireless Internet service.



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Chuck Fox, a cell-phone company worker, checks job assignments on the Internet in Chesterhill in southeastern Ohio.

Chesterhill on the satellite dish behind the library and the receiving antennas on the village's water tower and buildings.

The equipment brings a high-speed connection and opportunities for online job training and educational courses to a community where nearly 20 percent live below the poverty line.

The lack of technology and high-paying jobs has deepened the chasm between small Appalachian communities and the larger Ohio cities.

An entire Appalachian community with wireless Internet seemed like a pipe dream.

"I would say it's practically unheard of in Appalachia," said Leslie Schaller, a program director with the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks, an organization that works to develop community economic plans for southeastern Ohio.

"There are small communities all over (Appalachia) who have not had the ability to rebuild their small businesses because they haven't had access to the Internet," she said.

Ohio State University teamed with several agencies, including the Ohio Supercomputer Center and the Governor's Office of Appalachia, to select an Appalachian Ohio community they thought would benefit from the network.

A grant from the American Distance Education Consortium covered the nearly \$10,000 to install the equipment. OSU employees worked free, and the project coordinated training courses for residents on how to use the technology.

"Our goal is to bring economic stability to this community," said Alan Escovitz, one of the project managers for OSU.

He said he wants to expand the project into four more communities over the next 2 1 / 2 years, depending on funding. Those places haven't been identified yet, he said.

The most recent Census numbers show that the Chesterhill per capita income is \$17,329. Only 6.3 percent of its residents have a bachelor's degree or higher.

There are few jobs here, and it's not unusual for people to travel daily to other counties for work.

Resident Ken Peters, Chesterhill's liaison for the project, has been busy the past several months installing donated computers at businesses and for training classes,

and ordering external antennas for many of the village's businesses and his neighbors.

Most buildings along the village's main street are at least 100 years old and brick, which made it even tougher for signals to pass through, Peters said.

Having wireless service is something that can make Chesterhill more attractive to newcomers and entice them to stay, said Village Councilwoman Barbiel Saunders.

"This is all totally new for this village," she said. "This town needs to grow with people who come in with their own businesses, knowing that they can connect anywhere in the world they need to."

Training courses will answer residents' questions and allay the fears of people who are leery of the using the Internet, Peters said. Twelve people attended the first one. Seven people are signed up for another e-training course, and he's working to encourage more to attend.

He understands the new technology might be intimidating for some residents and business that have never operated with a computer, but it's crucial for the area to grow.

"We have to be ready. We really do," Peters said, walking by an "E for Me" training class banner posted outside the village offices.

Horner can't wait to get online at her flower shop, especially after receiving her latest FTD bill. Of \$430 in orders, she received \$157.

Doing her ordering on her own Web site will put that difference in her pocket, she said.

"It's going to be a big thing for Chesterhill," Horner said.

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