

Fed up with Dial up? Interim Solutions

By Shirley Freriks (published in the Fort Bragg Advocate-News July 21, 2011 on page 9)

Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County (BAMC or The Alliance) is working to secure broadband connectivity for residences and businesses at or above the National Broadband Plan standard of 4Mbps (Mega or million bits per second) download speed and 1Mbps upload. However, it will be a while before the goal is accomplished to ensure this basic access to the entire population and all businesses in the County. There is some urgency since it is highly likely that plain old telephone service as we know it with a dialtone will begin being phased out as early as 2018 in many areas. BAMC understands the frustration of those who are now fed up with slow dial up data transfer speeds and offers this information on interim solutions

First, the definition of broadband has changed. It has become more than just high speed Internet access as a luxury item. Broadband is now an essential public infrastructure and cornerstone of community life. It has become the primary means of transporting electronic information of all kinds quickly from one point to another. For example, mobile telephone service is delivered over a broadband network using VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). Video conferencing over the broadband network through services like Skype saves business people time and money with video conferencing and allows friends and family to see each other while chatting. Broadband will soon replace traditional dial tone as you know it. Large urban areas already have Comcast's "Triple Play" or AT&T's "U-verse" which bundles Internet, telephone and TV, and some areas in the County may also have this available. If you currently have cable for TV or use Direct TV, it may be possible to get high speed Internet with the same company.

The Alliance asks all who are unserved or underserved people and businesses to assist the County data collection by going to the www.mendocinobroadband.net and taking the Internet Access Survey. The website is compatible to dial-up usage and the survey only takes a few minutes at most. It is also recommended to do a consumer broadband speed performance test and register as a Broadband Dead Zone at <http://www.broadband.gov/qualitytest/about/>.

There are interim solutions for those who are fed up with slow dial up data transfer speeds of about 56kbps and need something faster. Such technologies, like DSL, WiFi (3G/4G wireless), or satellite may be available in your area. Below is a quick comparison of what they can provide: **DSL:** DSL is a technology provided over your existing telephone lines. It is only available in a 2-3 mile radius from a point where AT&T or other carrier has deployed the service. Check with your local provider to see if your phone system has been upgraded to DSL. MCN offers this service to some locales on the coast and their website is: www.mcn.org. DSL speeds and prices vary from 384kbps to 3Mbps depending on the availability, package selected, and distance from the central office. Surfing the web and checking email can be done with 384kbps. For viewing videos or playing games online plus access to new services like NetFlix online one needs the higher rates. A few communities (Ukiah & Willits) in our county are already receiving a new upgraded version of DSL called ADSL2+ which is broadband quality and will reach speeds of 20Mbps.

WIRELESS: There are various companies within Mendocino County who can provide "direct wireless" which is residential and business DSL without the copper wires required for landline DSL. This can be done using a variety of antennas aimed at the service provider's node on select hilltops which relay the signal. Technologies used are WiFi, WiMax, proprietary 900Mghz

radios and even microwave antennas. Wireless solutions are typically more costly than landline DSL or Cable Modems but provide similar performance for those who happen to be out of reach or not yet serviced by a major carrier.

CELLULAR MODEMS: Accessing high speed Internet connection through a cellular phone connection is yet another solution. US Cellular, AT&T, T-mobile, and Verizon offer a 3G Internet service in some areas, and other companies may as well. Marginal cell phone reception can be improved significantly by amplifiers and larger antennas designed to support cellular technology. Local offices will offer equipment recommendations and let you test to find out if there is enough signal strength for data access before needing to make the investment. There are also individuals and businesses in the area that specialize in providing cellular connections to homes & businesses. Look at the page called “Fed up with Dial up? – Set up suggestions” at <http://mendocinobroadband.wordpress.com> for a these set ups.

SATELLITE: Access to the internet via satellite is another solution available if there is a clear view of the southern horizon where the satellite is. It does have a latency issue which means there is a delay in accessing information due to its travel 46,000 miles up and down to the satellite. This is typically less than one second and acceptable to most people browsing the internet. Satellite is still advertised as 10 times faster than dial up even though it is not up to the National Broadband Plan standards. The cost of satellite has been traditionally pricey but right now both Hughes Net and Wild Blue are offering affordable basic packages subsidized by the Federal government through USDA’s Rural Utilities Services grants stemming from the Broadband stimulus finding. Both offer a 1Mbps download package for \$39.99 per month with no contract, no installation charges, and no monthly equipment fees. Look online at <http://www.hughesnetpower.com/plans.cfm> to see if your address is eligible. If the search comes back with “address not found”, call 1-800-212-2008. Contact Wild Blue online at <http://www.wildblue.com/usa/index.jsp> or call 1-888-578-7772. These packages are a significant savings over the usual cost IF your address is eligible. One word of caution with satellite is that there are usage caps or limits on how much can be used in a day. Heavy internet users can incur significant cost penalties if they go over the limit so read the terms and conditions carefully.

BMAC is offering these ideas to ease the pain of dial up for the short term with no guarantee that anything will work for an individual location but it is a place to start. Visit www.mendocinobroadband.net to look at the May 24, 2011 presentation to the Board of Supervisors for more details on the future of broadband. Please contact BAMC if you want to help the county-wide effort (sfreriks@mcn.org) or if you are thinking of starting something locally in order to coordinate local and county efforts for mutual benefit.