

# Online from out there

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Rural communities struggle to reach the information superhighway from the back roads

**BY THOMAS J. MORRISEY**

Capital News Service

High-speed Internet access remains out of reach for many Michigan residents, especially in rural parts of the state, and many who have access don't appreciate it, research by a Michigan State University team shows.

"There are still a lot of areas, especially in our state, where you just can't get broadband. It's a question, even where it is accessible, of whether it's being adopted," said Robert

LaRose, a professor of telecommunication, information studies and media at MSU.

Broadband refers to a high-speed Internet connection that is always on.

Laketown Township, just south of Holland, is working to make sure its residents can get Internet access, township Manager Al Meshkin said.

"Large portions of the township have virtually nothing available but dial-up," he said.

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# Internet

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The township has agreed to rent space at its township hall, 4338 Beeline Road, to I-2000 Inc., of Wyoming. The company will construct a 110-foot tower at the hall and sell wireless service to residents.

"We're trying to provide one more option," added Meshkin.

The tower construction has been delayed by the weather, said Steve Van Wieren of I-2000.

"The weather is the challenge, everything needed is available except the weather," Van Wieren said.

About 20 to 30 days after the tower's foundation is in, service will be operational.

The Rev. Vern Swieringa of Gibson Christian Reformed Church, 6486 140th Ave., in Laketown, didn't wait for the new tower. He and his wife, who is in insurance and marketing, had a satellite dish installed for high-speed Internet.

"We had to do something," he said, because dial-up was too slow for their needs.

He uses the high-speed service for e-mail and church work.

Ottawa County signed a high-speed wireless broadband agreement last year with iPCS Wireless Inc., an affiliate of Sprint PCS. It is designed to provide service to the county's rural areas and will cover about 95 percent of the county's population, according to a release.

The county will roll out the system this year, said Mark Knudsen, director of the county's department of planning and performance improvement.

I-2000 has towers throughout West Michigan, including

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sites in Pullman and Glenn. Proposed locations for new towers include Ganges Township and atop Mount Baldhead in Saugatuck.

Van Wieren said his plan is to cover Allegan County.

A legislative liaison with the Public Service Commission said he mostly agreed with LaRose's assessment.

"The kind of calls that I tend to get are from people who are aware of the values and benefits of the Internet, but are frustrated that they don't have access," said Greg White.

But the president of an association that represents 35 small, rural phone companies in Michigan disagreed.

"They have done a fantastic job rolling out broadband in their rural counties. When you think of some of the remote areas that now have broadband access, it's pretty remarkable," said Scott Stevenson, president of the Telecommunications Association of Michigan.

Stevenson said many of the areas where broadband is still not available are serviced by Verizon, which is not a member of his organization. He also said that legislation under consideration that would reduce the fees large companies like Verizon pay to use small companies' infrastructure could seriously hurt small providers' revenues, making it harder for them to expand.

LaRose has completed a four-year study about rural Internet access that was supported by a \$408,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The study, which compared Huron County in Michigan to other counties in Kentucky and Texas, found that Internet use was strongly tied to economic class, and suggested the danger that those without access would become "second-class citizens" in a technology-driven economy.

"We found broadband access increased, but we're still seeing a gap between rich and poor," he said.

LaRose said that efforts to build the necessary technological infrastructure for high-speed Internet have been mostly successful, but that not enough has been done on the human side of the equation — explaining the benefits to potential users and letting them know about Web resources that can help in both their personal lives and business endeavors.

And despite increased infrastructure, many users still rely on community resources such as libraries because home access is unaffordable, he said. In many parts of rural Michigan, there is heavy competition between users for those limited computers.

The spread of Internet access will open business opportunities in depressed areas of the state, he said.

MSU's LaRose said that the next step of his research team's work will be finding ways to spread the word about the benefits of high-speed Internet for those rural residents and businesses who do have access.

*Sentinel staff writers Jim Hayden and Jeremy Gonsior contributed to this story.*