



The Athens Messenger

Title: Broadband grows in Meigs County

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Victoria and Warren Taylor's Meigs County dairy prides itself on making a product that is fresh as can be: the milk is produced and packaged on the farm the same day the cows are milked, and appears on grocery shelves within one day.

That's faster than it took the staff of the Snowville Creamery to answer an e-mail, until about a month ago.

"It was comical," Victoria Taylor said of the creamery's office technology. "We had dial-up Internet, and we had one phone jack we had to trade between the computer and the fax machine, so if someone wanted to receive a fax, they had to bump someone else off the computer." Downloading any document took a frustratingly long time. Web sites with any animated features were blank.

The Taylors' digital dilemma is a common one for farmers and other rural businesses for whom high-speed Internet, otherwise known as broadband, is both a necessity and an unaffordable luxury.

"We could haul milk far away and be connected, or we could be out on the farm and produce milk fresh," Taylor said.

Two months ago, the Snowville Creamery and about 900 other households and businesses in rural Meigs County were among the areas of Ohio that lacked high-speed Internet access, but not today. After several failed efforts to get a better Internet connection for their business, the Taylors discovered that an Athens-based Internet provider had recently rolled out coverage into the area of Meigs County near Albany.

The new expansion was the work of Meigs County native Ira Dye, who grew up on a farm where his family has lived for generations. Dye just received two undergraduate degrees from Ohio University, but through his part-time job with



Messenger photo | John Halley
Ira Dye, left, and Chris Cooper of Intelliwave walk the road leading from the Leading Creek Conservancy District water tank where their company installed equipment to bring broadband Internet service to an area of Meigs County near Albany.

Internet provider Intelliwave of Athens, he was put in charge of bringing coverage to a new area of the region. A lot of work goes into deciding where to expand coverage, but Dye knew just the right place.

"When you grow up in an isolated place, the Internet is how you learn about the world," Dye said. "We want to close the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the Internet is one of the great levelers."

Dye went through his community drumming up interest for the service, and then scouted out a tower for the radio equipment.

Appalachian Ohio lags behind the rest of the state in access to high-speed Internet, putting the region at a disadvantage when it comes to education, economic development and business.

Athens Area Chamber of Commerce President Jennifer Simon estimated that about 40 percent of Athens County has no viable access to high-speed Internet.

A task force through the chamber's Economic Development Council met last week for the first time to address the issue of broadband development.

"In my opinion, it's a workforce issue and education issue that we need to have those speeds of connection," Simon said. "Kids are getting homework assignments that require the Internet."

The Ohio broadband map - developed by a state task force to show areas lacking high-speed Internet - will help local counties decide where to invest their efforts, Simon said, because this year county governments can put some of their public works money toward broadband Internet. That money is designated for critical infrastructure such as water, sewer, bridges and roads, and now Internet development.

Internet access is critical infrastructure in today's world, said Intelliwave's managing partner, Chris Cooper. "People have to have Internet access to run a business."

Rural areas have been the last to get high-speed Internet access, in part because the large-scale cable and phone providers typically target highly populated, growing areas. The same way cell-phone service is spotty in many areas of this hilly region, wireless Internet is hindered by the hills and valleys.

In contrast, Intelliwave actually targets under-served areas. The eight-person company faces the same issues as the large providers, but the difference, aside from an innovative approach, is, well, they live here, too.

Cooper, grew up in Southern Ohio and, after years in the city, he moved his

family to Athens about 10 years ago to start an Internet provider, which at the time provided dial-up service.

"I think it's a great place to live and work and raise a family, and we don't think it's appropriate for us to be penalized for our choice of living here," Cooper said.

Intelliwave's wireless Internet is broadcast from a 900mhz point-to-point network of six base stations located on towers throughout Athens County. Instead of building towers, Intelliwave works with local agencies and companies to mount their equipment on existing structures.

"Everyone loves their view in Southeast Ohio, so we don't want to muddle it up with a grey, intrusive cell-phone tower," said Dye, who now works for the company full-time as director of marketing and sales.

The tower that delivers Internet to Victoria and Warren Taylor's dairy is a water tower owned by the Leading Creek Conservancy District, a few miles away from the dairy farm, which is located on Route 143 between Carpenter and Harrisonville. While the radio equipment was being installed, the Snowville Creamery was in search of better Internet. The only option for them at the time was satellite, which can be expensive and unreliable.

"We kept getting solicitations for broadband, but when we called them, they'd come out here and say 'sorry, can't do it,'" Taylor said. Broadband access was offered by a cell-phone company, but the Taylors could barely get cell-phone coverage, she said. Although she knows Cooper and his family personally, she didn't know their company provided coverage in her area.

"You don't mean out here, do you?" Taylor thought when she saw signs for Intelliwave on the highway near the farm. "I just assumed we were too far out to get it."

Now, things at the dairy are a different story.

"It's like looking through a knothole in a fence at a picture and then all of a sudden having the fence removed," Taylor said.

The high-speed Internet saves manpower and work hours, Taylor said. The office still has only one phone jack, but now there are several computers. Taylor brought in her laptop this week and talked with her daughter in Europe through Skype, a video conferencing service on-line.

"It's really brought us into the - what century is this? - into the new millennium," Taylor said.