

D R A F T

Wire For Success

Black Tech Co. Pioneers Broadband in the Socket

On October 5, 2005, COMTek and the City of Manassas held a joint news conference to celebrate the installation of broadband-over-powerline (BPL) technology for Internet access. COMTek, the leader in BPL is a black-owned and operated communications technology firm. COMTek's CEO, Joseph E. Fergus, opened the half-hour news conference by explaining BPL allows access to the Internet by simply plugging a PC or computer network into a regular wall socket. This ease opens web-enabled communication to far more residences and businesses within a municipality. The town that's the first in BPL is Manassas, in northern Virginia. Manassas Mayor Douglas Waldron describes his town as "a ten square mile [bedroom community] of 12,500 households and 2,500 businesses." Don't let Manassas' size fool anyone. It is an affluent suburb of Washington, DC. Many Capitol Hill staff and high-ranking government employees live there. Manassas has a website, www.manassascity.org, which is a crucial communication link for residents and businesses.

The City of Manassas and COMTek brought two essential assets to the table to make a go of BPL: COMTek's Internet technology and Manassas' public electricity system. Manassas upgraded its electricity grid by installing fiber optics throughout the city. COMTek interwove its communication technology, which consists of servers, routers and other devices that are key to Internet transfer. COMTek also upgraded the city's electric service with automated meter reading, security and a technology for fast resumption after a power outage. Mayor Waldron acknowledges this innovation as "the major enabler of schools, public housing, and low-income communities." As of October 5, 700 Manassas businesses have BPL and 500 are in the pipeline. In symbolic appreciation, Mayor Waldron gave Joseph Fergus a link to Manassas.

Fergus announced that nine other US cities with public electricity were set for BPL upgrade. The selected cities probably fall in one of two situations: a city whose electricity grid is a fiber optic network or the city is willing to do extensive upgrade. This situation is reasoned because though fiber optic infrastructure makes the network extremely efficient, it is a challenge due to the high cost to install it throughout a city. COMTek's Fergus says the firm will consider Wi-Fi and WiMax as alternatives. On the horizon for Manassas is Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). What this means for Manassas and future towns is the choice of BPL, cable, satellite and telephone as means to accessing the Internet. COMTek charges \$29 per month for residential usage; therefore, it is competitive. Further, business can extend local trade to the global economy, telework is an option for employers, distance learning and e-medicine are realities.

It takes agreement and coordination between many entities for successful launching of any new venture. The COMTek/Manassas project is no exception. Other people speaking at the news conference were US Congressman Frank Wolf, American Public Power Association (APPA) President Alan Richardson, Virginia Center for Innovative Technology's (VCIT) Karen Jackson, and City Council members Bob Oliver, Judy Hayes and Steve Randolph. Congressman Wolf extolled the benefits of remote work, raising environmental consciousness and promotion of family. APPA President Richardson took a historic perspective on the deployment of electricity. He described electricity at first being seen as an oddity, then a luxury and, finally, a necessity. Richardson believes the same mind shifts will occur for broadband. Karen Jackson of VCIT described BPL as "inclusionary technology." She noted that rural communities, like inner-city communities, have been on the deficit side of the Digital Divide.

To learn more about BPL, COMTek, and the other organizations involved in this project, visit www.comtechnology.com, www.manassascity.org and enter "New

Millennium Research Council”, “Center for Innovative Technology”, “Open Access Networks” or “American Public Power Association” in your favorite search engine.

Another Telecomm First

It was announced October 6, 2005 that Earthlink, Inc. was selected to deploy citywide Wi-Fi broadband network for Philadelphia. Earthlink beat out Hewlett-Packard and ATT to set up the largest municipal Wi-Fi network in the US. Earthlink estimates that Philly’s 135 square mile area will be fully operational by 2006’s fourth quarter.

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