

Broadband popularity threatens dial-up access

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As America Online recently announced it is moving away from dial-up service to focus on increasing broadband usage, a loyal base of area dial-up users who have no access to broadband may be left off the high-speed bandwagon – even as Kentucky completes its plan to make broadband affordable and accessible to everyone.

In August, America Online said it will “continue to offer its dial-up access subscription service, but will no longer aggressively market it,” in efforts to tap into an industry that has shifted toward broadband, high-speed Internet access, according to AOL spokeswoman Molly McMahon.

“We see the trend toward broadband continuing as availability improves and broadband prices decline. However, we believe that a dial-up market will continue to exist for some time, and we plan to continue to offer a compelling service to those who need dial-up connectivity,” McMahon said.

Through the efforts of Connect-Kentucky, a Bowling Green-based nonprofit, Kentucky is the only state in the nation that has a comprehensive technology plan and is on the verge of 100 percent broadband availability

ConnectKentucky has until the end of the year to meet Governor Ernie Fletcher’s “Prescription for Innovation” initiative to have affordable broadband access in every part of Kentucky.

Mark McElroy, vice president of ConnectKentucky, said what AOL is doing makes sense, though they’re not the first.

“AOL is not at the front of the industry in terms of making an intentional choice to overlook dial-up. There are many content providers that have made the strategic choice to know that the dial-up choice for the Internet is insufficient for the type of content they want to deliver,” McElroy said.

Project manager Michael Ramage said companies who do away with dial-up Internet usage are in the minority, at least in the near future.

“The usage will still be there in some form, but it will be minimal,” Ramage said. “Across the nation, it may end up going away completely.”

But software applications requiring broadband connections are in increasing demand, Ramage said.

McElroy said trying to download video with a dial-up connection is like trying to squeeze a watermelon through a garden hose.

Mike Moore, president of the Bowling Green Area Microcomputer Users Group, lives in Alvaton, doesn't have cable Internet, but pays for service via satellite.

The 18-year-old BGAMUG group, which refurbishes computers for local communities and schools, said there is less of a need for dial-up modems.

“Within five or ten years, I think it will be a challenge for anyone to make money on dial-up Internet,” Moore said. “In the rural areas, its either dial-up or satellite dish.”

Moore said there are a couple of Internet Service Providers who still offer dial-up service, like Access Kentucky, Earthlink and Bellsouth.

The costs of dial-up service, which range from \$4.95 to \$24.95, Moore said, are much cheaper than satellite, which has an \$800 startup cost, and costs \$70 a month.

But even satellite isn't the same as cable broadband, he said.

“They call it high speed but its no where as near as fast as cable or even DSL,” Moore said.

Rick Williams, general manager of Bowling Green's Insight Communications, said trying to download video with a dial-up connection can take hours – sometimes days.

“Dial-up is just so slow that it can't deliver what the consumers are demanding now for the Internet,” Williams said. “As time goes by, it seems like our dependence on the Internet is becoming more and more.”

Williams said frequent e-mailing, as well as picture and video sharing, are things consumers can't expect to do as quickly with dial-up connections.

With more children being required to do assignments via the Internet, households without some type of fast access are almost left in the dust of the technical revolution, Williams said, adding that local libraries and other programs are filling in the gaps.

“The progress (Kentucky has) made is a faster curve than any other state in the country,” McElroy said. “But we still have a challenge.”

McElroy said ConnectKentucky has pushed broadband access availability to about 90 percent statewide.

Approximately 488,000 additional Kentucky households now have access to broadband that didn’t three years ago, according to Ramage.

“We have gone from 60 percent (availability) to 90 percent in a two-year period,” McElroy said. “This last 8 or 10 percent is the most significant challenge.”

Warren County is almost completely saturated with broadband. And while some counties don’t yet have broadband access, those areas are becoming more rare.

“There’s very few areas of Kentucky remaining that don’t have access to some type of broadband product now. It may not be what they want, but they do have access through DSL, cable, or satellite-delivered broadband,” Williams said. “Each one has its challenges.”

Williams said it’s not economical for Insight to install broadband in some rural areas, though state-backed loans, if available, could entice companies to give it a shot.

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