

Vermont's VTel Targets Rural Areas with Wireless Broadband Service

Beth Garbetelli, Associated Press

HARDWICK, Vt. (AP) — Lightning-fast Internet connectivity, telemedicine advances and even robot surrogates in classrooms are just a sampling of what state leaders and telecommunications companies like VTel hope will be coming to Vermont in the near future.

On Tuesday, VTel rolled out a statewide high-speed communications network in Hardwick that will serve sections of rural Vermont. Officials think it can be the first step in a wave of increasing technological capabilities for the state.

A wireless network will reach more than 20,000 homes and businesses in 24 towns across Vermont, including Hardwick, Berlin, Manchester, St. Albans, Barnet, Grand Isle and Windsor.

And the company's "fiber-to-the-home project" will bring high-speed Internet service to more than 16,000 homes and businesses in rural Vermont.

Shari Cornish, a Hardwick selectboard member and co-owner of a small crafts, gifts and home goods store called Whistle Emporium, welcomed the advances.

"So much is dependent on tourism and having people find us, our little store, but also Hardwick and restaurants and things to do here, it's easier when it pops up on their smartphone," Cornish said.

Vermont has been working for years to expand broadband Internet service.

Four years ago, Vermont ranked 35th in the nation in terms of broadband availability, according to David Weinstein, a representative of U.S. Sen. Bernie Sander's office. After the projects are complete, officials hope the state will rank first.

Speeds for the wireless network can range between 30 and 50 megabits per second. By comparison, dial-up service transfers data at less than 1 Mbps and DSL internet is about 1.5 Mbps, according to VTel representatives.

VTel hopes to offer wireless speeds of around 100 Mbps in 2015.

Part of the funds for the project came from an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act award. VTel also invested approximately \$160 million into its network, including wireless and fiber capabilities, before receiving the federal award, according to company representatives.

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"All this application that we have here — they're just tip of the iceberg," Director of Technical Solutions for Ericsson Osama Bilal said while standing in an area showing some possible uses residents could have for increased speed.

Some examples were high-definition video conferencing for work and a robotic tablet device on wheels that could allow sick students to attend class.

The Internet expansion will be a boon for business and job creation in the state, U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy said.

"If someone wants to build a company, grow a company, have a company, especially in rural America, they've got to have access, broadband access," he said.

Gov. Peter Shumlin praised the efforts to increase Internet access.

"Today, this is not just about jobs, it's about quality of life," he said.

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