

Va. town pioneers new broadband-over-powerline technology

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The entire city of Manassas, Va., is now online, thanks to broadband-over-powerline technology, Manassas Mayor Douglas Waldron said at a news conference Wednesday morning.

Manassas is the first town with full-scale deployment of BPL technology, a system that works through a local electrical utility to allow people access to the Internet simply by plugging their computers into electrical sockets.

"This is a major national technology milestone," said Joseph Fergus, CEO of COMTek Inc., the company that owns and operates Manassas's BPL system.

"It's no exaggeration to say that Manassas now has the distinction of being plugged into the Internet in a way unlike any other city in America," Fergus added.

Mayor Waldron said the BPL system was cost-effective and non-intrusive, as it uses existing power lines.

He said use of the BPL system would cost approximately \$29 per month for residential use.

Fergus said that out of the 12,500 households in Manassas, 700 are already using the BPL system, with 500 more waiting to be hooked up.

Among those 700 is Waldron, who said he uses COMTek's BPL at home and Verizon DSL to connect to the Internet at work.

Alan Richardson, president and CEO of the American Public Power Association, said the BPL breakthrough highlights a cycle the world has seen before.

"The electric utility industry is 120 years old," Richardson said.

"Electricity has gone from an oddity to a luxury to an absolute necessity of life.

"Today broadband is following that same track," he said, calling broadband "absolutely essential" for businesses.

At the news conference, which took place at a converted candy factory in Manassas, Waldron presented Fergus with a link of a chain, which he said was symbolic of the "chain of strength" of Manassas.

Fergus said that the fiber-optic basis of the infrastructure of Manassas made it better prepared than other cities to engage in this full-scale BPL implementation.

Richardson noted that there is opposition to the Manassas/COMTek deal by some telecommunications companies, but he thinks it was unfounded.

"We have to avoid this either/or idea," he said. "It can be both private and public."

The city of Manassas is providing use of their infrastructure to COMTek, who owns and operates the BPL system.

Karen Jackson, vice president for broadband programs at the Virginia Center for Innovative Technology, said that the BPL implementation

will positively affect education and economic development in Manassas.

"A lot of times we look to entice new businesses to come, and we forget to look at the companies right around the corner," Jackson said.

She added that she hopes BPL will provide a widespread solution to the problem of affordable Internet access at less populous areas.

"A lot of rural communities right now face the problem of how to get broadband," she said.

Fergus said that Manassas's BPL system is not a test or a pilot, but the real deal. "It is a full-scale citywide implementation of BPL," he said.

"This is technology that will be deployed in the next two years to scores of communities nationwide," he added.

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