

Year-long project gives OC business districts free wireless Internet service

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Daryl Hicks, Oil City's North Side Business Association president, connects to the wireless Internet service outside his business on Seneca Street. Hicks said the North Side is up and running and the South Side tower and connection should be complete soon. By Jerry Sowden Oil City is a town with connections — Internet connections, that is.

The North Side Business Association has announced that a project directed at providing Oil City's North Side and South Side business districts with free wireless Internet service is nearly complete.

Currently, Oil City's North Side — from as far north as the Polish National Alliance all the way south to the end of Veterans Bridge — is “fully operational,” online and open to the public, according to Association president Daryl Hicks. He said the Association hopes to have the last wireless antenna installed on the South Side of the city by no later than Wednesday, thus providing the South Side district with free wireless Internet as well.

Hicks said the project has been more than a year in the making, but he said the Association wanted to keep the plans quiet until the infrastructure was in place.

“We wanted to make sure it was fully up and fully functional before we let people know,” Hicks said. “We wanted it to be a dynamic development for the city, which is why we've kept it kind of hidden.”

Hicks said the project was actually the brainchild of another member of the Association, Isaiah Dunham, who does tech support for Clarion Bathware and runs a computer consulting company on the side.

“I've always been interested in the wireless community and I've read some articles about cities like Philadelphia and St. Louis doing something similar to this, so I thought ‘This would be

really cool to have here,” Dunham said. “Now anybody in the city can hop online and do whatever they need to do.”

Providing free regional or citywide wireless Internet is both impressive and progressive for such a small city. Online research suggests that only a handful of cities in Pennsylvania offer such services, and one of those cities — Philadelphia — is the largest city in the state and fifth-largest in the nation.

Wilkes-Barre, Kutztown and Dublin are also credited as cities with regional or citywide Internet access, according to Scribd.com.

Additionally, two cities in Pennsylvania — Pittsburgh and Bethlehem — provide what’s called “city hot zones,” according to the website. Hot zones are different than regional or citywide networks because hot zones consist of various Internet “hot spots,” that are linked to one another.

The website says three regions in the state — Reading, Altoona and York County — provide wireless Internet for public safety and municipal use only.

Hicks said Oil City’s service could be used in safety and surveillance capacities, too. He said the wireless network could allow the city to employ wireless surveillance, something he and other business owners in the area are considering in an effort to combat vandalism. Hicks said every year vandals destroy planters put out by local business people.

“With this, there’s a possibility that we could expand the network and help the city out, too,” he said.

There’s also the hope that wireless Internet will boost business and tourism in the downtown area.

“Just getting more foot traffic downtown would be fantastic,” Dunham said.

Hicks, who owns the DayDia Building on Seneca Street where the North Side wireless antennae was installed, said the project’s planning proved more difficult than actually obtaining the funds to launch the project.

Hicks said the total start-up costs of the project are about \$1,200, money donated by Bridge Builders Community Foundations. Other than the monthly service fee paid to Internet carrier Comcast and a monthly maintenance fee paid to Dunham, the project requires little financial upkeep, he said.

Dunham said he is waiting to hear back from a property owner on the South Side of Oil City for permission to install a second antenna, which would further increase the wireless signal as far south as Rite Aid or possibly even the Villa Italia.

The project is not without some glitches, and there are some “dead zones” already. The Transit Building, for example, does not receive a signal most likely due to heavyduty building materials

used in building the structure. And a small area behind the Brody Block is also prone to a weak or non-existent signal, Dunham said.

Hicks said the Association may consider expanding wireless services in the future, but he added he doesn't want to weaken the signal in the process.

"If we expand the service we might lose some integrity, and we don't want to do that," he said.

Hicks said nearby businesses paying for Internet services could opt out of their current contracts and use the city's signal if they wish, but added that businesses with a lot of processing needs may not be able to rely on it fully.

Besides, he said, it's the customers, not the proprietors, who Hicks is hoping make the most of the services.

"It's meant more for the customers," he said. "It's there and it's free — please use it."