

When Pigs Wi-Fi

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HERMISTON, Ore.

This is cowboy country, where the rodeo is coming to town, the high school's "kiss the pig" contest involves a genuine hog, and life seems about as high-tech as the local calf-dressing competition, when teams race to wrestle protesting calves into T-shirts.

But Hermiston is actually a global leader of our Internet future. Today, this chunk of arid farm country appears to be the largest Wi-Fi hot spot in the world, with wireless high-speed Internet access available free for some 600 square miles. Most of that is in eastern Oregon, with some just across the border in southern Washington.

Driving along the road here, I used my laptop to get e-mail and download video - and you can do that while cruising at 70 miles per hour, mile after mile after mile, at a transmission speed several times as fast as a T-1 line. (Note: it's preferable to do this with someone else driving.)

This kind of network is the wave of the future, and eastern Oregon shows that it's technically and financially feasible. New York and other leading cities should be embarrassed that Morrow and Umatilla Counties in eastern Oregon are far ahead of them in providing high-speed Internet coverage to residents, schools and law enforcement officers - even though all of Morrow County doesn't even have a single traffic light.

The big cities should take note, said Kim Puzey, the general manager of the Port of Umatilla on the Columbia River here. "We'd like people to say, 'If they can do it out in the boondocks with a small population, that model can be applied to highly complex areas,' " he said.

Mr. Puzey, who says wireless broadband is central to the port's operations, argues persuasively that broadband is just the next step in expanding the national infrastructure, comparable to the transcontinental railroad, the national highway system and rural electrification.

Indeed, we need to envision broadband Internet access as just another utility, like electricity or water. Often the best way to provide that will be to blanket a region with Wi-Fi coverage to create wireless computer networks, rather than running D.S.L., cable or fiber-optic lines to every home.

So if the first step was to get Americans wired, the next step is to make them wireless.

Two pioneers in that process are Portland, Ore., and Philadelphia, which are both moving toward citywide Wi-Fi Internet access. Consumers will still have to pay for broadband, but only about half as much as they do now.

Still, Portland and Philadelphia won't have their systems in place until next year. Meanwhile, the system in eastern Oregon covers a larger geographic area, is free for consumers and has been up and running for more than a year and a half.

One reason it sprang up here is that a nearby Army depot contains chemical weapons, so there is special concern about what would happen if a cloud of nerve gas escaped from the depot. That fear helped provide a pot of federal money to underwrite safety systems.

Usually, the police and fire agencies communicate just by radio, but Hermiston decided to go with a public-private partnership that established a Wi-Fi network. The police chief, Dan Coulombe, showed me the wireless computers that all police officers now carry. They can download data and receive images from video monitors - and, if nerve gas ever escaped, display the cloud's direction and speed.

Fingerprint readers are now being added to these portable devices so a police officer can almost instantly run a person's fingerprint through a multistate database. And if there's a report of a burglary, the police rushing to the scene can download floor plans of the building, live images from video monitors and information about the alarm system.

The wizard behind the system is Fred Ziari, an Iranian immigrant and Wi-Fi pioneer who runs a high-tech company in Hermiston and Portland, EZ Wireless. Mr. Ziari contracted with the local authorities to provide the Wi-Fi service, which lets consumers piggyback for nothing.

Hermiston is already starting to introduce WiMax, the next generation of technology after Wi-Fi, offering much higher speeds and greater range.

Other American towns need to follow Hermiston, not necessarily in holding "kiss the pig" contests, but in ensuring broadband Internet access as reliably as they do water or electricity. The fact is, unless you're a cowboy here in eastern Oregon, you're behind the times.