

January 2008 Wireless Marin Update

The next step in the Wireless Marin program is to seek an opportunity to put in place a pilot project that would demonstrate use of a current or new technology in a new manner, which could be reproduced in other parts of Marin County or elsewhere, or which could be enlarged to serve a greater population. There appears to be a number of potential participants for a pilot broadband project in Marin County. The Wireless Marin program consultant CBG Communications, Inc. has identified possibilities with the Cities of Novato and Mill Valley as well as with the Golden Gate Bridge District.

Novato's Police Department has installed in patrol cars touch screen mobile data terminals, cameras and wireless microphones for documenting activities in the field. The information gathered is currently being downloaded via a wireline connection at Police headquarters. The Department anticipates developing a wireless hotspot to download this data in the field. The thought is that the entire city could eventually be covered by such wireless facilities. Other priorities of the Department and the City have delayed implementation of such a program, however. In addition, Mill Valley currently has one secure network hotspot, which is used for police networking. The potential the City would like to explore is to expand the current, limited wireless system to other areas for other public agency and general public use around the city using buildings and existing streetlight poles for placement of WiFi facilities. Like Novato, Mill Valley will move forward beyond the initial hotspot based on available funding, manpower and relation to other City priorities.

Another possibility, which could benefit a larger segment of the community, is to work with the Golden Gate Bridge District to implement a wireless, broadband pilot project on transit along the Highway 101 corridor. The District is exploring the technical issues associated with providing such a pilot project, which would make WiFi available initially on some of its Highway 101 commuter busses. This project would allow transit commuters to make productive use of commute time, which if successful, could attract additional riders to existing transit services.

Such a pilot project could employ currently available cellular and WiFi technology to determine its utilization by people riding mass transit, the potential to increase ridership and the commensurate reduction in commute traffic and emission of greenhouse gases. Among the questions that could be answered by such a pilot program are:

- How is ridership affected by availability of broadband?
- Can the potential impact on ridership and thus fewer vehicles on the road due to the availability of broadband service to riders be quantified?
- What demographics are most likely to take advantage of broadband while utilizing the mass transit system?

- What limitations does currently available cellular broadband have? Would higher bandwidths, such as enabled by different technologies, need to be employed to have a significant impact on utilization?
- If successful, how can implementation beyond this pilot be funded?

Wireless Marin staff and consultants are working with Bridge District staff to see how they can work together to help move this pilot project forward.