San Juan County – a Third World Country?

I have never thought of San Juan County as being as remote as a Third World Country although many of my friends tell me they are leaving for “America” when they go off island. I guess I was shocked and appalled to find out that the level of Internet service that is offered in our communities is less than most Third World Countries. I thought the poor service was just at my house or my computer.

As I was personally uninformed, I decided to write this article as a layperson so that the options for our Internet service could be easily understood. I have purposefully not used acronyms and the technical terms. I hope that this article won’t make the technical persons in the industry LOL, too much.

As I understand, there are several avenues for consumers to obtain Internet service in our County and they include the following:

- Dialup – Internet through the telephone line, which is very slow service. Basically obsolete.
- DSL – Internet through the Century Tel telephone line and the level of service depends on your distance from the central office; 0.5 to 10 megabits, but very inconsistent and dependent on well-maintained copper lines.
- Satellite Service – Internet through a satellite connection. Level of service can be up to 12 megabits but the delays in signal are significant and high data costs are an issue.
• Via Cellphone – Internet through your cellphone through Verizon. Service level is at 0 to 20 megabits. Heavily dependent on your location on the islands.
• Fiber Optic from Rock Island - Internet service with 10-100 megabits per second, the gold standard. Reliable and scalable.

I was told that the best solution is to use Fiber. It can be expanded in the future and is not distance hampered. It can provide very fast internet, excellent HD pay TV services, telephone and home security services as well. In the Islands, none of the other options above provide the same levels of speed and quality as fiber.

**How do we get it?**

It just so happens, OPALCO is currently deploying their grid management updates and they have decided to install the fiber with expansion ability at the same time. Their efforts will bring fiber to the main roads but it will be the home-owners or subdivision homeowner’s association responsibility to arrange for the fiber to be installed in the side roads and to the actual residences. The “middle and last mile” as it is known in the industry. As OPALCO members, we should be pleased that OPALCO is forward thinking and installing the fiber.

In the future, Rock Island, a separate operating entity from OPALCO, has agreed to provide Internet and telephone service to islanders. Rock Island will not be offering to bundle HD pay TV and home security services.

Rock Island will be providing the associated Internet support and is working closely with The Computer Place and other local service providers to offer computer customer service.
Several homeowner associations have already decided to join together and share the funding of the installation of fiber to their subdivision. The cost will vary but the excavation is the most costly item and will run $10-$15 per foot from the main roads such as Roche Harbor Road. Individual homeowners will then need to absorb the cost to install down their driveways. The costs will vary but $4,000-$5,000 would be a good average estimate. Rock Island’s monthly fee, including the telephone service will be around $95-150 subject to the speed you select. There is also a one-time hookup fee of $150.

Roche Harbor Resort has contracted with Rock Island, to install the fiber into the resort which will provide internet and telephone services to the transient population staying at the resort and in the marina. Roche Harbor deems having high speed Internet as their number one guest amenity. Guests stay longer when they can keep connected to their work and family.

CenturyLink has not yet presented any new options to our market place nor are they participating with the installation of the fiber. This is understandable as they are very similar to our national cellular service providers. Our demographics do not attract any of the major service providers to invest in the infrastructure so that they can provide the end product to us. Our County just doesn’t have the population to support their economic models.

Having a low population level is what most islanders want and having to deal with issues surrounding goods and services is a consequence of living our dream lives.

As property owners, we need to be the ones that accept the responsibility and bring the fiber to our homes. We need the level of communication, safety and entertainment that it offers. The fastest growing segment of the general population joining Facebook is those individuals that are over 65 years old. Do you know of any grandmas or grandpas in our County?
I am a grandma plus I need to process real estate out of my home office during the off hours.

I know this feels like a very long-term project and will take years to actually see the results of the efforts, but we need to start sooner than later. It is very unlikely that a major service provider will decide that there is enough return on their investment to install the infrastructure needed. Backing fiber is going to amount to faster Internet and the opportunity to bundle telephone, at a minimum. However, the same technology is critical for safety and emergences services in addition to economic relevance.

Currently, our average speed for Internet from all sources is 1 megabit as compared to America that offers 20-30 megabits. It takes approximately 3 megabits to stream a video.

Advice: If you are newly constructing a home, remodeling or just excavating on your site, it is prudent to install conduit for fiber even if you don’t plan on actually hooking up to the service. If your neighborhood is doing any excavation, the homeowners association should contact Rock Island about installing fiber.

This island has always strived not to become a place of “those that have and those that have not”. Historically we have always applied that to not wanting to develop into a location such as Martha's Vineyard or Jackson's Hole. It may be time to consider that the “have not's” will be those homes without good Internet service.

As a REALTOR it is a concern to me that America continues to progress and we are remaining in the dark. As part of any buyer’s feasibility study on a purchase, we recommend that they determine whether the level of Internet service at the property will be suitable for them.

By: Merri Ann Simonson