

Can town compete without fiber?

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkans.com

How is a small, rural town supposed to compete for people and industry over the next decade if it only has Internet capabilities that go up to yesterday's standard, or even today's?

This is a question people in Oberlin might be asking themselves since Rural Telephone affiliate Nex-Tech pulled out of a project last year that would have connected all of Oberlin to fiber-optic Internet — a kind of connection that can offer download speeds of up to 100 megabits per second.

Today, telephone lines, wireless and cable systems offer downloads up to 6 megabits per second.

Jeff Wick, chief operating officer for Nex-Tech, said the company ended its project when it realized that Oberlin's power poles couldn't safely hold the fiber-optic lines it wanted to add to them. Burying the lines, he said, would have cost \$2.5 million — too much for the project to pay for itself.

It's not that the city isn't aware of the condition of its poles. City Administrator Karen Larson said that the city council plans on preparing a timeline this year to begin

their replacement and repair.

"Some are in pretty good shape, others in poor shape, and others in very poor shape," Mrs. Larson said. "(City Foreman Dan Castle) is making a map right now, and putting down where we need to start working on it all. It will take years to get done, though, because we can't afford it all at once. We have to do it slowly."

Both Mrs. Larson and Mr. Castle said it was too soon to guess what it might cost to repair or replace all the poles, though Mr. Castle guessed it could be as much as \$20,000 a block.

"(Fiber-optic Internet) is very important with our changing society," said county commissioner-elect Sid Metcalf, who was chairman of the Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp. board when the project was being handled. "Everything is on the Internet; you can buy a new car on there if you want to. The world's just going that way, that's all there is to it — more technology."

"We have a pretty good system now, but it would be nice for it to be faster. Everyone is in a hurry, and everything works at a high rate of speed. So yes, I think it would be

advantageous to have fiber optics. I was disappointed (when he found out Nex-Tech had pulled out). I was eagerly awaiting the new system."

Nex-Tech's own website sounds a similar note. "Technology advances," the page reads. "Even higher bandwidth will be needed for things not yet imagined, and fiber will be ready."

And it's not just the cities that will have this service already, but area towns where Nex-Tech has built systems. Norton has fiber, and the lines there were buried. (See SMALL on Page 5A)



Elementary, Head Start kids jump back into school



OBERLIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL hit the ground running with an early breakfast on Thursday. The first graders (above) were already full of energy by the time the bell rang. It was extra special for Head Start student Kaylee Green (left), as she was crowned by teacher Deb Helm for her birthday while Jimmy Neal and Jenna Niklason waited for the celebration. Also in Head Start, Austin Rhoades talked with teacher Karen Smith while the kids settled down to begin their day. — Herald staff photos by Stephanie DeCAMP



Flu cases are up; vaccine limited

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkans.com

It's not too late to get your flu shot — and if recent warnings from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment mean anything — you really should do it.

Surveys of Kansas health clinics showed that in the first week of January, flu-like symptoms appeared in 6.4 percent of those seen by physicians, said state Health Officer Robert Moser, who is also secretary of the department. That's nearly double the figure from last year at this time period, which was only 3.4 percent.

Administrator Marilyn Gamblin said that the Decatur County Health Department had 37 flu shots left as of Monday. The shots are covered by private insurance, Medicare and Medicaid, she said, or if you're paying cash, it's \$25.

"There have been quite a few cases ... confirmed in the county," she said, "and it's not too late to get your shot. They recommend it for people that would be at the highest risk, like children 6 months and older, adults 65 and older, pregnant women, those with diabetes and others with long-term conditions that could put them at risk for complications with influenza, like heart disease."

Last flu season, said Dr. Moser, the flu directly or indirectly (via pneumonia) was the cause of 1,300 deaths in Kansas. So far this year,

the count already is up to 460. The typical peak for flu cases, he said, is February, so not only are the rates of infection higher this year, but they're earlier, too.

Ms. Gamblin said that the supply of flu shots, however, is limited right now, and that she has heard of a few departments in the region that are looking for more.

"If we run out of them here," she said, "you'll have to check around with other offices. I don't know that anyone has an overabundance."

"The initial signs are a high fever, aches and a cough. Mainly what triggers it is, with a cold you can have a fever, but it won't be high. But with influenza, it's a high fever and you're really sick — and really achy. It depends on the individual for how long it lasts; the actual, true influenza is going to last longer than a cold. It can last up to a couple weeks."

Ms. Gamblin said the best preventative is to wash your hands often, cover your cough, stay away from those you know are sick and from large crowds of people.

"I would ask that business owners and managers encourage their employees to stay at home when ill to avoid the spread of influenza in the community," said Dr. Moser. "It's also important for everyone to wash their hands throughout the day with warm, soapy water and to sanitize telephones, keyboards and other office equipment used often."

Winter Sports section in this week's Oberlin Herald

The annual Winter Sports section is inside today's Oberlin Herald. The keepsake edition includes team pictures from Decatur Community Junior High School and Golden Plains Middle School and High School, and individual pictures of the Oberlin Red Devils' basketball players and wrestlers.



Banks, government to close for holiday

The third Monday in January has been set aside to honor slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

In Decatur County, that means all banks, post offices and federal government offices will be closed Monday. The United Northwest Kansas Federal Credit Union will be closed, but that is the day, at 11:30 a.m., the credit union will have its annual meeting at St. Francis of Assisi Parish Hall in Norton.

Even though the county courthouse will be open, the Clerk of the District Court's office will be closed. Oberlin and Norcatour city offices will be open for business as usual.

Oberlin schools will be closed for

a teacher in-service day. The district superintendent's office, however, will be open.

Jerry's Bar and Grill in Norcatour is the only area restaurant known to be closed on Monday. All other eating establishments, including the Sale Barn Cafe, will be open their regular business hours.

Trash pick-up in the city and county will operate on the normal schedule.

The Oberlin Herald will operate on its regular Monday schedule with the news and advertising deadline at noon. The paper will be returned to Oberlin on Tuesday afternoon and be in most mailboxes by Wednesday

Rare wet spell covers county

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkans.com

January and February are typically the driest months of the year for northwest Kansas, but the last four weeks or so have been blessed with rain and snow.

"Precipitation started for us in the second half of December, when we started getting snow, and we've been in a wetter-than-average pattern ever since," said Jerry Killingsworth, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service office in Goodland.

"In the last half of December, we got 6.3 inches of snow, which evens out to 1.02 inches of liquid. Since Jan. 1, there's been another 2 inches of snow, or .15 of liquid, which means the first snow was kind of wet and the second a little dry. All in all, it totals to about 1.17 inches of precipitation."

Mr. Killingsworth said it's unusual for such a wet spell to hit during the winter months, and not to count on it sticking around. Through this week, he said, it looks like the weather will be back to what is considered normal — cold and dry, with highs in the low to mid 40s.

"Remember that winter is normally our driest time," Mr. Killingsworth said. "Rain starts picking up more into March and April. In a normal year, we would expect a lot of rain then. There are long-term climate predictions made out of Washington, and the Climate Prediction Center there says that in January, February and March,

we'll have below-normal precipitation, which isn't surprising because we're coming out of a drought and we're not back from it yet."

"I think the wet late December was a temporary thing," said Mr. Killingsworth. "I hate to say that, but it takes a while to come out of a drought. The general rule is that it takes as long to come out of one as it takes to get into one, and ours started in late May, early June. So it may not be until we get more into April, May or June that we'll hopefully start reversing the trend. But it's a gradual process."

There is some hope, however, that the drought could have been a one-year affair, due in large part to the weather phenomenon La Niña, which comes about two or three times a decade and is associated with lower-than-normal sea surface temperatures in the Pacific that affect weather patterns across the globe.

"The only thing we have to go by in long-term forecasts is La Niña," Mr. Killingsworth said, "and it has a very good track record for drought in the Plains. Last year, we were in it, so it fit the pattern we've seen in the past 100 years. La Niña years always have a higher chance of drought. It's over now, so cross your fingers that without it, we'll get over the drought. But once again, it doesn't happen overnight. So maybe the little thing we felt in December is the first taste of getting out."

Dust storm blew through the area

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkans.com

If it's not a snow blizzard, it's a dirt blizzard.

That's essentially what happened Friday, when a dust storm blew up out of Colorado and swept over Decatur County for almost seven hours, said Dave Floyd, the warning coordinator meteorologist for the National Weather Service office in Goodland.

"In general," he said, "visibility was about a half to one and half miles, but in some places, it was zero. It kind of was a dirt blizzard."

Mr. Floyd said that the storm system that brought the 40- to 60-mph winds started out in the northwest, and was clearly visible on satellite images.

"We noticed that huge plumes of dirt were being picked up from fields in eastern Colorado," he said, "and those were being blown over western Kansas here. It was very visible on satellite. First, we had a high wind warning south of Interstate 70, and then north of it we had a wind advisory — we didn't think the wind would be quite as strong, maybe around 45 mph, but we knew it would be an issue."

"The thing you're never quite sure of is how much dirt that wind will pick up. Usually it takes two to three hours and then you start noticing visibility dropping and a lot of dirt in the air. I think we started noticing it in Colorado around 10 a.m., and at its height, visibility was anywhere from half a mile to zero."

And like most dust storms before it, Mr. Floyd said, it seemed to disappear just as fast as it came up.

"In the afternoon, a cold front swept through from the northwest," he explained, "and as soon as that came, the visibility went up to 10 or 15 miles, and that's when the temperature dropped 20 degrees in an hour. There was a little bit of light snow in the evening, but it didn't amount to much more than a few tenths of an inch."

Mr. Floyd said dust storms are actually more common than you'd think. They happen around five or six times a year, he said, usually in the springtime.

"If you don't have a lot of snow over the winter," he said, "we get some pretty intense spring storms in February and March, with winds 60 to 70 mph. There are occasions when you get strong thunderstorm outflows that produce localized, 30- to 60-minute dust storms. They're basically microbursts that pick up dirt. We had one event in May of 2004 that killed our state senator, Stan Clark, because the gust from the storm swept along Interstate 70 and visibility went to zero for about 15 minutes. It created a lot of traffic accidents."

"(These storms) aren't a real common thing, but we do have ways to deal with it, like advisories and warnings. And like I said, if it had been a big snowy month, we wouldn't have had blowing dirt, but probably a blowing snow advisory. But there's a lot of bare ground here, and once it got going, that dirt just blew for a couple hundred miles."

