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Bland County joins the digital revolution

Free wireless Internet access will serve residents and provide an essential amenity to visitors.

Today Bland County strides into the digital world as its free, public, wireless Internet system goes live. They get it in Bland.

"It," of course, is that this is a wireless world. People expect to be connected to their data almost everywhere. If business leaders and tourists visiting a town like Bland cannot surf the Web on their laptops, they'll go elsewhere.

Bland's wireless network provides that amenity while preserving natural beauty, one of the region's greatest assets and tourist draws. There is no need to string wires across mountains.

U.S. Reps. Rick Boucher, D-Abingdon, and Bob Goodlatte, R-Roanoke, have long recognized the importance of bringing new technology to Southwest Virginia to promote economic growth. Both have strived to bring home funding for a variety of technology projects. Bland's system incrementally builds on their work.

It is not all about economic development, though. Current residents will benefit from access to an essential communication tool in the modern world.

Today, wireless service covers only downtown Bland, but the county is already thinking about a second phase that would expand service to most of the county.

In many other communities, private Internet service providers oppose public wireless access, but Bland's system ran into no opposition.

"If they [providers] were aggressive and wanted to invest more in broadband here, there probably wouldn't be a need for this program," explained County Administrator Jonathan Sweet.

Other underserved rural communities should consider emulating Bland's system. If it works as planned, it will be expandable and cheap, less than \$6,000 to install and about \$100 per month for operations. Once Bland works out all the kinks, Sweet said, the county will be glad to share its expertise.

A few square blocks of public Internet access in downtown Bland will not cure the region's economic woes, but the infrastructure to connect Southwest Virginia to the rest of the world must be part of the solution.