

By Tom Schuman

FairNet: Monticello

Delivering Wireless Service to Rural Areas

High-speed Internet service is as important in Ade and Wolcott as it is in Fort Wayne and Evansville. Trying to help meet the broadband needs of communities throughout the northwestern quarter of Indiana is Monticello-based Fairnet.

Originally a family-owned company based in Remington, FairNet was purchased by the Carroll County REMC in December 2000. Just as the rural electric member cooperatives were created to serve the electricity needs of customers outside the major population areas, FairNet seeks to do the same with its wireless products.

In 2002, FairNet was ranked the seventh largest wireless Internet service provider in the nation. General manager Patrick Canganelli says others, due to population density, may have more customers, but few exceed his company's coverage. He and engineering manager Phil Mailloux put the ever-expanding FairNet territory at 7,400 square miles.

"We're trying to fill in all the really remote areas with all the capabilities the big cities have," Canganelli explains. "We've found towns that no one else serves. There is so much pent-up demand. We've got people calling and asking us to please come to their town."

Mailloux says he can answer many of those requests because he doesn't have to run fiber or build a costly infrastructure base. The dishes and panels on the company's 197-foot-tall tower located outside of its downtown office send signals to the variety of towers located throughout the service area. Customers within eight to 10 miles (extending to a range of 15 miles in some cases) of a tower can receive the service. Site surveys take place for every potential customer to ensure that a high level of service can be achieved at that location.

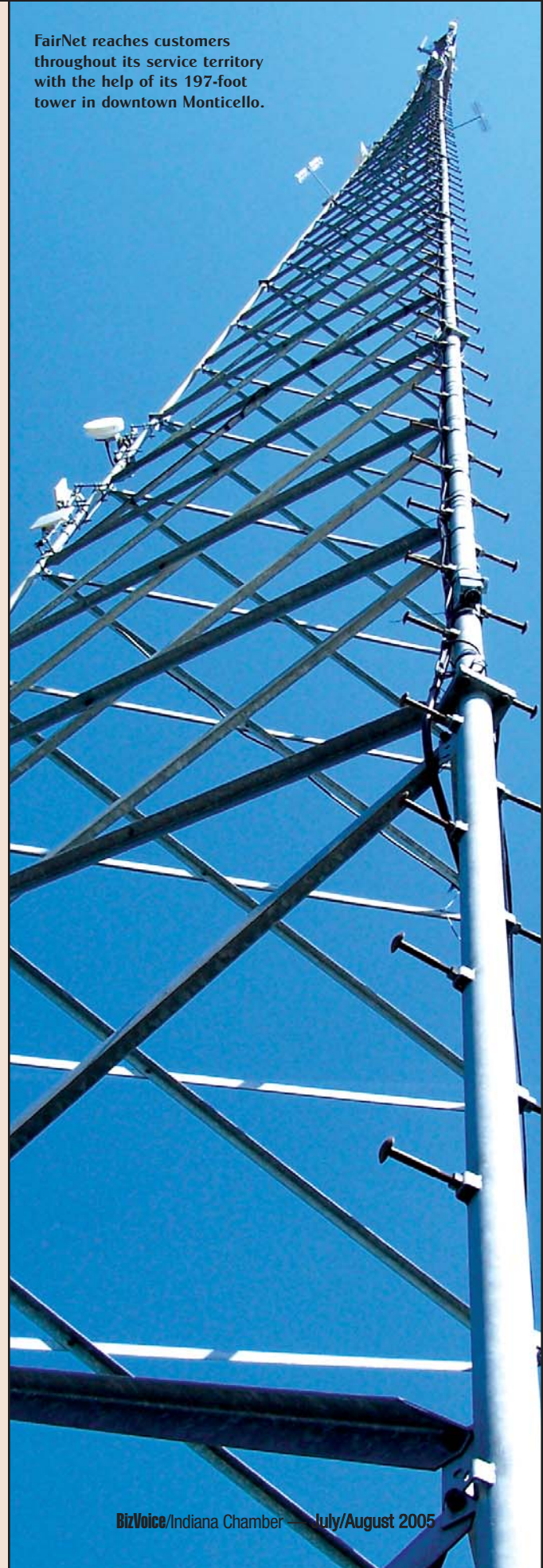
Although FairNet has been in front of the pack in its area of the state, the wireless word is beginning to become more crowded.

"There are not a lot of wireless service companies in our area. We started deploying wireless before the competition," Canganelli contends. If there is a wireless competitor, Mailloux says, "The best thing to do is to work with them. Interference is not something that only goes one way. The consensus is to always try to work with someone."

Meeting customer needs

The FairNet leaders believe their customer service capabilities help distinguish their product. Same-day service if problems arise and the ability to meet individualized requests are possible, they say, without the heavy

FairNet reaches customers throughout its service territory with the help of its 197-foot tower in downtown Monticello.



infrastructure needs of the larger telecommunications firms.

“We’ve raised the bar for the competition,” Mailloux asserts, adding that broadband service not previously offered in certain rural areas has become available after FairNet entered the territory.

No matter the type of telecommunication infrastructure being discussed, the economic development implications are significant.

“Whether it’s a large company or a factory out in the country, there is no difference as far as the needs. To a small town, it’s a huge issue. Is a business going to commit to an area if it doesn’t have high-speed Internet?” Mailloux asks.

Most of the FairNet technology operates on a line-of-sight basis. The company benefits from the lack of extreme hills or mountains in its service territory. The large number of grain elevators and water towers help provide suitable locations, with adequate height, for the wireless transmission equipment.

Some technology advances are taking place in transmission that does not require a direct line of sight. Thus far, however, the service area in such cases is significantly reduced. The changes in technology take place rapidly.

“We’re constantly testing new things,” Mailloux declares. “If there’s a new product out there that does something better or cheaper, we want to look at it.”

Additional services

FairNet does much more than execute the wireless transmission and test new products. It sells computers, does networking, has seen a tremendous growth in personal computer repair, donates some web design work for nonprofits and serves as a drop-off point for computers and other electronic scrap that is then shipped off for recycling.

Among its recent additions is a cybercafé in its Monticello office with several company-provided workstations and wireless access for people with their own computers. The area has attracted some regular visitors in its first few months of operation. More are expected during the summer months as visitors to Indiana Beach and the many summer homes in the area will seek a location to stay connected electronically.

On the business side of the ledger, FairNet is also serving as a co-locating site for other companies’ electronic records. In the event of the loss of information at the company site due to a natural or other disaster, the indispensable information needed to keep the company running can be retrieved.

Canganelli says a common misconception about wireless providers is that they lack the sophistication of their larger, more established competitors. “We’re highly secured. We have banks, hospitals, the county courthouse among our customers.”

Looking ahead

The fact that the “wireless world changes every day,” according to the FairNet pair, makes it particularly difficult to look far into the future. What is likely, though, is a continuation of some of the trends already taking place.

Canganelli sees rapid growth in the number of wireless hot spots, but warns “we have to be careful how we implement it.”

For Mailloux, broadband will continue to advance beyond just the Internet. Watching television, making phone calls and more will all occur over the same pipe of connectivity.

As for wireless, he concludes, “What I see is not only going 10 to 12 miles, but 20 to 30 miles with more speed and at a cheaper cost.”



Patrick Canganelli says moving quickly and providing unique services, such as this cybercafé within its offices, are essential to growing the business.



Storage of electronic records for businesses is also part of the FairNet mix of services.

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: FairNet at (574) 583-9906 or www.fairnet.info