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Tahoe areas struggle to get high-speed Internet

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bonanza News Service
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Imagine sitting at your computer waiting to download a file for work and 30 seconds, a minute, two minutes pass by. In today's Internet-driven world this seems impossible, but many North Tahoe residents are experiencing slow Internet connections and download times due to the lack of broadband options in the area.

"We're a little frustrated because of the speed," said Michael Plapp, a resident of Carnelian Bay who has dial-up service. "Surfing, online banking - it's frustratingly slow. On repeated occasions we've called Charter (Communications) and SBC because they keep promoting high speed Internet in their mailers, but you call and they say 'We're not in your area.' We're right in the dead zone. For whatever reason, they're not in this area."

Plapp is not alone in his frustrations. Many residents and businesses have fought to get high-speed connections in their home or business through SBC, Charter Communications or Cebridge Connections.

Sunnyside Resort on the West Shore struggled for two months before they were able to get DSL service through SBC. They were told on repeated occasions they couldn't get it, but Dollar Hill-based Alpen Software worked on their behalf to get it installed by testing each of the resort's 14 phone lines. In April, Sunnyside had a high-speed connection.

"It is much easier," Janet Gregor, lodge manager at Sunnyside, said of DSL. "One purveyor said they would only accept all their orders on the Internet. With dial-up, it was impossible. They would have lost us (as a customer). We had no choice (but to get DSL)."

Bonanza News Service Photo - Court Leve Alpen Software intern Derek Ganong plugs information into a laptop while lead technologist Pat Ross and CEO Doug Greenwood test for wireless signals from the roof of a home in Tahoe City. Some communities on the North Shore still can't get broadband Internet service.



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Many people plan their lives around having a high-speed connection. Colby Kearsis, a software developer, said it was crucial for him to have a fast Internet connection when he moved to Truckee more than seven years ago.

"I could have had a big house with a garage in Tahoe Donner, but I took a small apartment in downtown Truckee because of DSL," Kearsis said. "Once you get broadband, you never go back. You hold on to that baby."

Shannon Hill, a college student who lives in Kings Beach, has had high-speed Internet through Charter for six months and is happy with how fast her connection is.

"It was almost impossible to load the pages I needed for school (with dial-up)," Hill said. "It would take forever. Dial-up up here is pretty worthless."

John Biebl, a real estate agent with Pacific Crest Properties in Truckee, said he has had trouble selling homes that are not able to get broadband.

"What we found is the typical buyer in our area has a mobile lifestyle," Biebl said. "They use the area as a mobile office. When you're in a tight market and you have two similar homes and one has it and one doesn't, the one that has it will sell faster."

Biebl noted that most of Truckee is able to get high-speed Internet now, but that it is still an issue in North Tahoe.

The problem, say Internet experts, is not a simple one. Each Internet vendor has different obstacles to overcome in providing Internet in the area and certain factors specific to Tahoe make availability even more difficult.

With DSL, only SBC customers who are within 14,000 to 16,000 feet from a central office can receive the service. SBC currently has central offices in Truckee, Tahoe City, Homewood, Brockway, Stateline and Northstar.

"We understand how crucial DSL access is," said Vanessa Smith, spokesperson for SBC. "It (Tahoe area) is an area of focus for us. It is definitely a priority for us, it is just how fast we can do it."

Smith said when SBC looks at expanding in an area they analyze the scope of the area, population density and competitive threats. The company is also beginning a fiber expansion project nation-wide, enabling fiber to go closer to homes. Smith could not give a timeline for if or when that project will make it to Tahoe.

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