

## A wireless downtown?

Tuesday, May 10, 2005

By Marty Cheek ([martyc@morganhilltimes.com](mailto:martyc@morganhilltimes.com))

Morgan Hill could be ground zero in promoting a novel way of using advertising to stimulate wireless broadband technology throughout the computing world.

Both the City of Morgan Hill and a local businessman are jumping on a bandwagon that are providing free Internet access in several places around town - with no annoying popups to pay for it.

For several years, wireless Internet access (or wi-fi) has been the big buzz word in fostering Internet connections via radio waves. With wi-fi, Web surfers need not be tethered to a phone cable but can simply tote their laptop to cafés and coffee houses with "hotspot" access to connect wirelessly.

But cost factors have made municipal governments and Internet service providers (ISPs) dawdle in creating wide-spread public wi-fi service.

South Valley entrepreneur Jim Carrillo hopes to change all that. His idea is to use Internet-based advertising to encourage local businesses to cover the bill of installing and maintaining wi-fi equipment.

"The reason why wi-fi is having a hard time getting adopted is because it's hard for cities to realize the benefits of the cost of creating the infrastructure," said Carrillo, a Morgan Hill resident.

"Advertisers could take in the cost of creating the infrastructure and maintenance. The concept is to use Morgan Hill as a demonstration that free Internet access can be a viable object for ISPs to provide."

The ad revenue idea proved successful in helping radio and television build up their infrastructures during the early days of those technologies, he said. And wi-fi might benefit from the same business model.

Carrillo believes so strongly in his concept that he started a company called Synaptx to develop this new approach of merchant-paid advertising to build the wireless infrastructure. Last year, Synaptx used the Virginia city of Hampton, with a population of 140,000, as a technical test site.

After two months, about 80 Hampton merchants such as coffee shops, restaurants and cafes signed up for wi-fi advertising.

"The majority of them are testing the system out," he said. "A lot of them are supporting wi-fi because they realize it's bringing foot traffic into the downtown area."

Last month, Synaptx signed a deal with San Martin-based South Valley Internet (SVI) to sell Web advertising to Morgan Hill businesses in exchange for installation of Wi-Fi equipment (essentially routers with radio antennas). The two firms call their non-profit venture the Public Wi-Fi Project.

If it succeeds in Morgan Hill, it might also be expanded throughout the South Valley to include Hollister, Gilroy and San Juan Bautista.

A key to the project's success involves how discretely Web-based ads are displayed on user laptop screens, said Bob Brentnall, chief executive officer of SVI. Earlier attempts at on-line advertising by Internet firms such as NetZero and Juno failed because they were "terribly obnoxious" by covering up Web pages, he said.

"What Jim has done is very, very tasteful," Brentnall said. "I think Jim has found a good balance with it."

Signs in stores will identify a location as a wi-fi hotspot.

Synaptx hasn't extensively started marketing the idea yet to Morgan Hill merchants, but Carrillo said local business people have expressed interest and several have signed up.

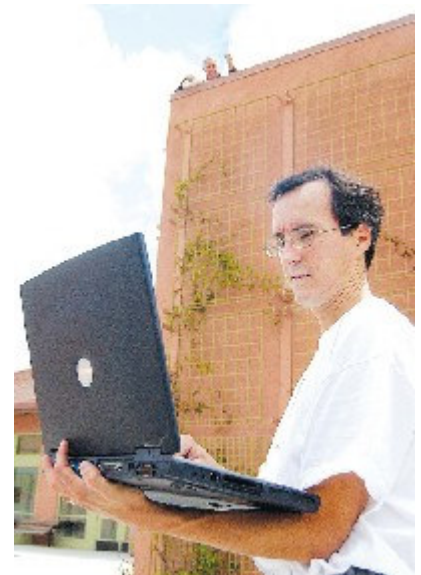
So far, there are few wireless hotspots throughout Morgan Hill. Many potential users don't know they exist. The city has installed wireless Internet routers at the Aquatics Center and also at the Community Center.

Carrillo will show off wi-fi during the Art a la Carte festival for children Saturday, May 14, 11am-3pm at the community center, Monterey Road and Dunne Avenue.

Downtown business owners Brad Jones and his wife Cinda Meister have installed wi-fi for customer use in their BookSmart book store as well as their Caffee Kaffee Vin coffee shop.



Councilman Greg Sellers shows his daughter, Bevin, 5, how the wi-fi program would work in the downtown



Jim Carrillo from Synaptx measures the signal from an antenna held by Bob Brentnall of South Valley Internet on top of the Community Center.

Few customers use the service at the BookSmart site, but the social environment of the coffee shop encourages a large number of customers to use it while enjoying their espressos and lattes, Jones said.

"There's people down there all the time using it," he said. "It's everybody from kids playing games to moms doing homework with their daughters."

Recently, he said, he saw a local mother and daughter with laptops "back to back" using the Wi-Fi system at his coffee shop.

"We have a lot of business sales people who use this as their office away from home," he said.

Jones sees some possible potential for success for the Public wi-fi Project because, from what he has observed, customers definitely want wireless access to the Internet.

"I think that it's viable and will create a wireless hub for downtown," he said. "I think generally there's going to be some opportunities to do targeted marketing there."

Jumpin' Juice and Java at Monterey and West Fifth Street, also offers free wi-fi.

Morgan Hill Councilman Greg Sellers is a vocal advocate for building a wi-fi infrastructure in the community. Like Jones, he's keen on seeing how successfully the Public Wi-Fi Project is implemented with South Valley merchants.

"It's something I'm very interested in for personal reasons because I use wi-fi, and I constantly need to find sites," he said. "As a council member, it's not fairly appropriate for me to be involved in or promote any business. But at the same time, when you see an opportunity, it's good to take advantage of that opportunity."

Sellers, who runs a campaign consulting firm, often enjoys the convenience of hooking up his Apple Macintosh laptop to the downtown coffee shop's wi-fi system and checking his e-mail or doing on-line research.

About 80 percent of Morgan Hill's workforce commute to other communities during the day, so he sees wi-fi as a possible way to keep people in town - especially at night or on the weekends.

"It's nice to be able to walk downtown and sit down and do your work on your laptop as opposed to sitting in some office corner," he said.

"There's a lot folks who are in home-based businesses that the Chamber (of Commerce) has identified, so that's another segment."

Several major American cities have installed significant wireless coverage in specific neighborhoods to provide users with easy Internet access at low or no cost by local government. The Marina district in San Francisco has been a test bed for this in the Bay Area.

But the real tests will take place next year in Philadelphia and Portland, Oregon. Both cities plan to overlay their entire metropolitan areas with low-cost Wi-Fi in 2006.

For more information about the Public Wi-Fi Project, check [www.pwip.org](http://www.pwip.org) or call Synaptx at (888) 755-8537.

Website: [www.synaptx.com](http://www.synaptx.com)

E-mail: [jcarrillo@synaptx.com](mailto:jcarrillo@synaptx.com)

---

### **Marty Cheek**

Marty Cheek is a reporter for *The Times*, covering education and health care. He is the author of '[The Silicon Valley Handbook](#).'