

Internet connectivity grows more important in Sisters

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

The latest addition to the vernacular of the “wired world” is an example of onomatopoeia — a word that sounds like the noise or action designated: hiss, buzz, bang.

In this age of pandemic restrictions for gatherings, up pops “zoom.” As in, “We can set up a Zoom meeting to discuss the contract.” Face-to-face conversations via computer or phone screens can be Zoomed, which brings to mind fast or instantaneous transmission (zoom like a fast car) and up close (as zooming in).

Zoom is the name of a computer application that enables groups of people to come together in a “meeting room” while on their own computers. They have the ability to either see everyone on the screen at once or one at a time as they speak.

Many normal meetings, gatherings, presentations, (even weddings) in Sisters or elsewhere are now accessible via Zoom, so people can gather as a group while maintaining their social distance per the COVID guidelines. No need for masks or leaving the house. The public can attend meetings in City Hall via Zoom or have family gatherings at a distance.

As a result of pandemic adaptations for working from home, more people are discovering they can. And the like that option. Conversations around Sisters lately are going something like this:

If more people in the big cities discover they are able to work from home all the time, pandemic or not, they may decide to leave behind the congestion and demonstrations and high-priced real estate and come over the mountains to Sisters.

According to an article by Eric Mortenson, editor of “The Other Oregon – A Voice for Rural Oregon” newsletter, Oregon already had the second largest percentage of

people working from home (7.5 percent), behind only Colorado. According to some recent surveys, the share of remote workers nationwide has approached 50 percent.

If people decide to migrate to rural areas, and work from home, economists see that migration as a positive for those communities, with city folks bringing their jobs, money, and spending to town. Possible negative impacts on a quiet rural community, Mortenson points out, is that these “Zoomers” also bring their big city taste, expectations, and politics with them.

Something that could slow this urban exodus is directly related to the fact that reliable high-speed internet isn’t always available (or speedy) and if it is, the price of that connection can be higher than in the big city, with fewer providers to choose from.

As pointed out in the two previous articles (*see The Nugget September 9 and 16*), the infrastructure to accommodate thousands of newcomers working from home just isn’t there yet.

Very recently, due to the pandemic, headlines are beginning to reflect this dearth of connectivity in rural America. Here in Sisters, we aren’t without connection to the internet, but it can be expensive, not all that fast, and not reliable all the time.

Tollgate resident Matt Wessel, who has always worked from home, even prior to COVID-19, has ongoing problems with the inadequate upload and download speeds he has with his internet provider. As the online load increased with the pandemic, he has experienced dropped connections right in the middle of online meetings. His transmissions are very data heavy and it takes a long time for them to load. He is frustrated with the service, or lack thereof, that he receives from his ISP, a complaint commonly heard in Sisters.

During the pandemic,

telemedicine has gained in popularity, allowing patients to contact their medical providers via video calls, a phenomenon that likely will remain long after the pandemic.

Telemedicine has seen a particularly big jump in popularity in Sisters since the onset of COVID-19. High Lakes Healthcare reports they do their telemedicine calls with patients in the afternoon. They average 10 telemedicine appointments a day and report it is working well, proving to be a time-saver for both the doctors and the patients.

Summit Oregon, Bend Memorial Clinic’s Sisters office, estimates 25 percent of their appointments are now successfully being done via telemedicine. The issues addressed include urgent care, writing new prescriptions, and general family medicine. They report that the appointments over the internet are particularly convenient for their patients who live outside of Sisters Country and would need to travel a long distance to come in. Plans were already being made to initiate telemedicine appointments in 2020 and they just got sped up when the pandemic hit. If patients don’t have internet access, the appointments can be done just over the phone, unless their condition requires an office visit.

St. Charles Family Care Clinic in Sisters reported that in the early days of the pandemic as cases peaked, an estimated 50 percent of their appointments were via video and telephone.

They are currently seeing far fewer patients that way. The clinic nurse indicated that telemedicine has its place but they believe in-person appointments provide better care overall.

Schools have had to find creative solutions during the pandemic for students who don’t have access to computers and/or the internet for virtual instruction. However, this is not a new problem. A certain percentage of students have never had internet access, which impacts their ability to do homework and attain the same education as their wired classmates.

Todd Pilch, director of technology for the Sisters School District, explained that the district has been providing Chromebooks connected through Google to students at all grade levels, but it wasn’t until schools were closed due to the pandemic that all students were able to take their Chromebooks home. If students don’t have internet connection and live in a cell coverage area, they are given a personal hot spot, which is a device about the size of a cell phone. The hot spot is paired to the student’s Chromebook creating their own cellular connection. The school is able to set controls which dictate what the student can access online.

Pilch believes that full-time online instruction is probably

not the answer for everyone. “The quality of instruction can be good if it is carefully chosen,” he said.

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— Todd Pilch

Some high school students had already been part of the Education Options program where they work independently online, with a check-in weekly with staff. For most students, however, Pilch thinks the human interaction that comes in the classroom is necessary.

One positive outcome of the pandemic is that a spotlight has been shone on the necessity of having high speed internet available everywhere in the country. As so many employees work from home, and students learn in virtual classrooms due to the pandemic, the reliance on computers and internet access has highlighted the inequity in access within a wired society.

The internet has become a vital tool for participating in our economy, our educational system, our healthcare system, and most facets of everyday life. All Americans need access to high speed, affordable, and reliable broadband service.



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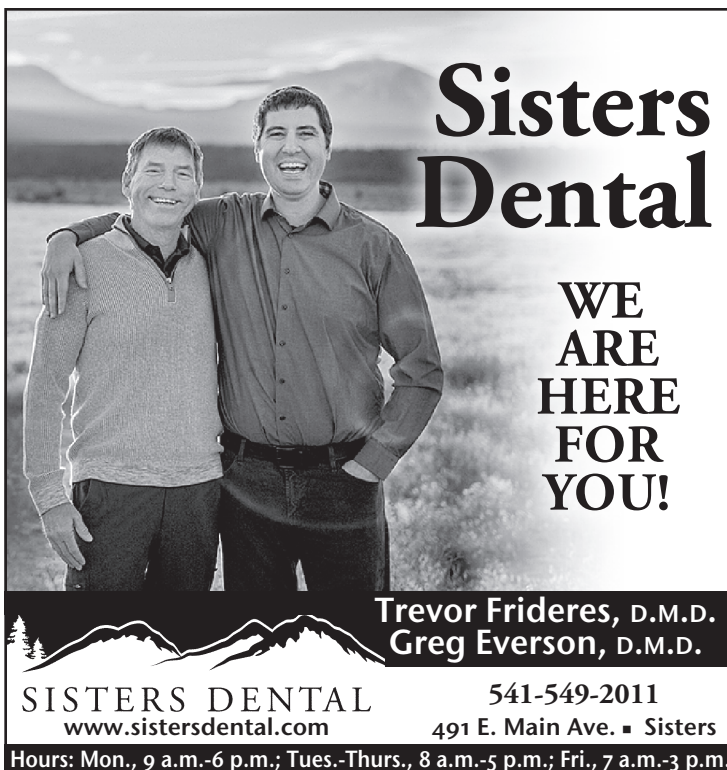


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