

Duo wants Keizer to have its own internet service

By ERIC A. HOWALD
Of the Keizertimes

At a Keizer City Council meeting in early February, a pair of Keizer residents spoke to the councilors about a new-to-Keizer idea: internet service as a public utility.

While Dylan Juran and Daniel Miedema were hoping to get the council to take a closer look, the council and city staff largely dismissed the notion.

Mayor Cathy Clark spoke of concerns about competing in private markets. City Manager Chris Eppley balked at the potential cost in a time of already-tight budgets.

However, there are other cities that have built out internet services as public utilities and others that installed what became a backbone network that enhances economic development in their area (See story below).

It may seem like a stretch for a place like Keizer, but Juran has concerns that

go beyond the immediate area.

“The end of net neutrality is my biggest thing and I don’t like the idea of data being discriminated. I don’t like the idea of being told that I have to buy into an off-brand Netflix to get better service,” Juran said.

Net neutrality refers to preventing internet service providers from charging more for allowing certain content to flow across their systems, charges which would likely end up costing users who want to access the content. Users might also incur additional charges for accessing the internet from different types of devices. Net neutrality is currently mandated as part of a 2015 U.S. Court of Appeals decision, but there is increased concern that it might be overturned under pressure from the new presidential administration.

“I think of the internet as a utility in the same way someone else might look at water. If we had contracted out

water services to a fictional company called Waternet that wanted to charge you a different price for shower water than cooking water, we would not be okay with that. But that’s the way it might happen with the system we have,” Juran said.

Miedema is an iOS app developer who works from home in Keizer and his job depends on having access to lots of bandwidth to upload and download data as he works with associates in Portland and even across the country.

“I would personally love to see lower costs and have it be more accessible with better speeds. That unlocks possibilities that some people don’t even realize are out there,” said Miedema. He mentioned monitoring one’s home from a phone or work computer as a possibility.

However, thinking about internet service as a public utility requires an almost fundamental shift in how most

people approach internet services. There was a time when accessing the internet took a machine that cost upward of \$1,000 or more, but that is no longer the case. Today, it’s possible to get an internet-capable laptop for \$35. That doesn’t include the internet-capable device many people are already carrying around in the pockets and handbags – the cellular phone.

“The barrier to entry has dropped so low that it is near-ubiquitous,” said Miedema. “I want another option (for service) that treats internet the way I think it should be treated. It’s not the special thing it once was. We’re not there anymore, the internet is everywhere and it should be treated differently.”

The one member of the city council who seemed open to at least discussing the matter further was the council’s newest, Laura Reid. She also happens to be a teacher at McNary

High School.

“There is a digital divide with some students not having access to the internet at home, and more and more assignments are internet-required,” said Reid.

The way Miedema and Juran envision a public utility internet service is as something that meets the needs of net neutrality and greater bandwidth while also creating greater access within the city.

“I really want people to understand that the younger generation needs the internet. The internet is not a convenience like television, or even the way it once was. That has changed,” Juran said.

“I would love to have a free tier,” added Miedema. “Maybe I pay more so someone else can check email and do research and look at what’s happening in their city. Maybe I’m subsidizing that, but I am more than okay with it.”



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In their presentation to the Keizer City Council to consider a public utility internet service, Keizerites Dylan Juran and Daniel Miedema mentioned municipalities that are similar to Keizer in some ways, but both took drastically different approaches to the same issues.

The municipalities Juran and Miedema brought to the table are Washington’s Mount Vernon and an alliance of Monmouth and Independence, in Oregon, that created MINET. Keizertimes reached out to the managers of the cities’ networks to find out what they did and

how they did it.

MOUNT VERNON

Mount Vernon sits about 60 miles north of Seattle. Its population is about 33,000 residents. Keizer’s is just north of 37,000. Mount Vernon includes about 12 square miles of terrain while Keizer is about seven square miles.

The city installed an eight-mile fiber network ring around the central part of the city that now serves government agencies and several businesses. By any stretch of the imagination, the city was an early-adopter of the technology. They began talking about doing it in 1995 and the first half of the ring was

completed in 1998.

“The mayor and police chief asked about a facility they were buying across town and how to put them on the same network. I said we should do fiber,” said Kim Kleppe, information services director for Mount Vernon.

Fiber optic networks are generally preferred to copper and hybrid networks because there are no known limitations on how much data can be pushed across them.

By 2001, the city completed the backbone of the fiber ring that now saves the city money – to the tune of \$100,000 a year on phone and data services

– and has become an attractive amenity for businesses seeking to expand. They did it for a total cost of less than \$1 million and fiber network installation is even cheaper now. The first half of the network was paid as they went and the completion was aided by a \$500,000 grant.

To make it happen several things had to work in the project’s favor, Kleppe said.

“You have to have mayor and council support along with the public. Then you need to go out and figure out the business model of how things will operate. Then it’s down to the implementation of the model. An education process also needs to happen because it will flounder,” he said.

Network installation even became part of the city’s development code and now property developers have to pay for new network nodes. That has helped the network grow.

Businesses can connect the network through private internet service providers that contract with the city to install the hook-ups. Kleppe said local market competition has decided the prices. About 110 businesses have opted to connect to the fiber ring.

“We’ve had a couple of businesses move here because we can give them fiber. It’s only a handful, but businesses like it,”

Kleppe said.

One of the features Mount Vernon doesn’t offer is residential service. Kleppe said the cost to hook up a single residence is simply too prohibitive.

“We set a hard line that we will not go into the red on an install,” Kleppe said.

MONMOUTH-INDEPENDENCE

While Mount Vernon choose to make its fiber network a public utility to save money, Monmouth and Independence did so out of necessity.

“At the time, about nine years ago, the best internet service we had was the equivalent of dial-up with maybe some DSL,” said Don Patten, general manager of MINET. Major internet services like Comcast and Charter made it clear at the time that broadband internet wasn’t going to arrive for some time.

“We didn’t want to become part of the information divide,” Patten said.

The cities originally took out a \$3.7 million, state-guaranteed loan to build the network. It was refinanced a few years later to provide operating capital, but the service has been in the black for at least the last three-and-a-half years, Patten said. It has a market penetration of better than 85 percent.

Unlike Mount Vernon, the

service is available to residential customers and pricing ranges from \$10-a-month for a bare-bones package to an ultra-fast, high bandwidth package for \$80-a-month.

With Oregon State University nearby and several students from the area, Patten said it isn’t uncommon for students, and their friends, to come home for the weekend and do all their downloading over MINET because the service is so much faster than what is available down the road in Corvallis.

The system has also been a boon to local public entities, like the Central School District. MINET has a direct fiber connection into every school in its area and can expand and contract usage depending on needs. That was key during a recent round of public school testing.

“Central was one of the few districts, if not the only in the state, that didn’t break down when all the students were online taking tests,” Patten said.

While MINET has had some struggles in bringing the network to profitability, Patten said that there are also forces at work that had nothing to do with the network.

“It comes down to how much value a community places on having the resource, and that will ebb and flow with the politics,” Patten said.

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