

Mt. Baker School District Area– The Need for Cell Phone Service and High-Speed Internet

by Linda Dorsett, March 2008

The Mt. Baker School District area is the “land that technology forgot”. The area is rural with a high percentage of low income families. It also offers world class scenery and recreation. Tourism is the largest industry in the area and has the potential to grow significantly – especially as the Vancouver Olympics approach. A variety of other businesses exist, but they are mostly small and totally insufficient to support the local population. This forces lengthy commutes for many of the local residents. The lack of access to cell phone service and high speed internet connection is one of the major impediments to economic growth in the area. It is also putting the School District at risk of becoming unable to meet its educational requirements.

The South Fork area of the School District has no access to high speed internet other than satellite service, which is expensive and unreliable. Cell phone service in that area is spotty. The North Fork area hosts a growing tourism industry but has almost no access to cell phone service and limited access to high speed internet. The North Fork is served by cable (high speed internet) in a few select areas. The cable runs to Maple Falls and into the Columbia Valley. Anyone near the cable but at the end of a driveway longer than fifty feet faces prohibitively expensive hook-up charges. The South Fork, Silver Lake Road and Glacier communities have no access to high speed internet service. In many locations, satellite access is not even an option due to hills and trees blocking clear access to the sky. This leaves dial-up connection as the only option.

Lack of access to modern technology is the single most limiting factor to economic growth in the District. It is creating problems for the tourism industry, which caters to people who take cell phone and internet access for granted. Tourists are increasingly concerned about staying connected to their jobs and families. Local tourism is not likely to survive as a viable industry without these services. Non-tourism based businesses are struggling as well. Businesses need to be able to communicate with employees who are out of the office. In today’s environment this requires a cell phone. Dial-up connection to the internet no longer comes close to meeting the needs of businesses trying to operate from this area. Dial-up connection is completely unable to handle the increasing reliance on graphic rich documents, video clips and other large documents that businesses send to each other without a second thought.

The lack of access to high speed internet threatens the viability of the school district as well as local economic development. The school district is facing new requirements to continue serving students in the face of a health epidemic, which would require remote access to schoolwork, and to provide enriched learning opportunities that are increasingly available only through a high speed internet connection. Without home based access to high speed internet for all students, the Mt. Baker School District will fall out of compliance with regulations and will be unable to provide an adequate education.

Lack of cell phone coverage also presents a significant safety issue. The Mt. Baker School District area is served by long, lonely roads. Schools buses, law enforcement, border patrol, fire departments, locals and tourists all face difficulty in calling for help when it is needed. The Sheriff’s Department and Border Patrol utilize a satellite system that provides better coverage than the average person can access, but still has holes that leave our safety professionals vulnerable. Local residents and tourists are unable to call for help for themselves or others. Those in trouble must wait for a passing motorist who is willing to help and that motorist must leave the scene to contact emergency services. Often such helpful individuals make contact with local emergency services only to find that they do not have accurate or essential information. This further slows the rescue process.

Clearly, it is time to find a way to bring the Mt. Baker School District area into the modern age by providing all homes and businesses with access to high speed internet and cell phone service. It is particularly important that a solution is created that assures access for all. A piecemeal approach to the problem will result in pockets of homes that may never be able to receive service. This will not meet the requirements of the School District or local residents, nor will it solve the safety problems. A broad coalition of groups and individuals are coming together to support this idea.

Preliminary research has already been conducted and an initial plan has been developed that can result in service to all. The State of Kentucky has managed to connect their entire state with high speed internet. They did it though a collaboration of government, service providers, foundations and citizens. A similar united effort is needed for the Mt. Baker School District area.