

Tunnel Vision

By *John Quinn MSc IT*, Published on December 6th, 2009

We are still without industrial grade broadband; an absolute prerequisite for a hub town. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking on the nightmare of yet another dig up of our roads in the New Year. For broadband users, will this latest underground venture deliver the desired result in terms of value for money, convenience of service and will it have the innate flexibility to satisfy the demand for future expansion? Why not suspend this speculative digging to explore other above ground wireless alternatives? 4th generation (4G) wireless technologies have enormous potential, in particular WiMAX (Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access). It is up to ten times faster for half the price of DSL or other wired broadband, and broadcasts without the inconvenience and expense of wires. There are no inherent bottlenecks to prevent its implementation as it allows users to bypass existing telecommunication networks. This new wireless technology provides high speed Internet and phone access both at home and on the move.

According to Jim O'Hara of Intel, the chipmaker's boss in Ireland, "this type of technology is a game-changing technology in the way we live, work and play". WiMAX was used successfully in Indonesia in 2004 to replace the entire communications infrastructure devastated by the Tsunami. Closer to home, Dublin based, Imagine Communications plans to install the necessary hardware, which is made by Motorola on 350 masts around the country providing coverage to 90% of the population. Intel will be providing a special mobile chipset to support WiMAX.

Athlone, Dublin, Sligo, Tralee and Wexford will be the first to be included in the initial rollout of WiMAX but the rest of the country will have to wait for up to two years. Perhaps a two year wait is a price worth paying to ultimately escape from Eircom's most expensive line rental price of the European Union. Indeed any initiative that exposes a dominant telecommunication company to greater competition is to be encouraged and welcomed.

Skepticism about yet another obscure telecommunications company promising revolutionary Internet connection speeds is understandable. Conversely, the substantial investment of €100m in this project by technology giants Intel and Motorola is a clear vote of confidence and should enhance its prospect for success. Nevertheless, there will be some lingering doubts about WiMAX as a potential solution.

A closer look at recent trials of this relatively new technology in the UK is reassuring. Maidstone in Kent is a case in point, this trial covering 7.5 square kilometres from the centre of Maidstone, saw WiMAX deployments with Kent Fire & Rescue Service and Maidstone Borough Council. Chris Woodward IT Technical Services Manger, Maidstone Borough Council commented: "The trial demonstrated the flexibility that WiMAX offers. It's clear that there are specific benefits to be gained from deploying WiMAX across a range of public service scenarios". In another example, Steven Jewell Head of IT and E-Government in Milton Keynes Council said that "60% of respondents surveyed expressed satisfaction with a WiMAX trial that was the first of its type to be run in the UK".

WiMAX opens up a number of cogent possibilities for work and play even while on the move. While travelling by train, you are either bored with the MP3 player or find yourself trapped in the crossfire of that dear old lady noisily shouting down her mobile phone. With WiMAX, you could escape this by playing your favourite graphics intense, multiplayer 3-D battle even while the train is moving. Wi-Fi hotspots are often few and far between, you're in a panic having forgotten to book that busy and must-have restaurant for your husband's birthday.

continued on next page.....

There is no need to panic as WiMAX provides seamless Internet access between these hotspots. Ever been at that boring junior GAA match in atrocious conditions out of a sense of duty or guilt? Never fear, with WiMAX you can download that movie you've being meaning to watch and look forward to doing so in the comfort of home. Generally speaking, the salesperson or executive frequently finds himself stranded between Wi-Fi hotspots without internet access; one of the primary design goals of WiMAX is to plug these gaps in coverage by providing internet access everywhere and while on the move.

We could pioneer all this for Tuam and why not? We may not have a direct rail link to the town but we could have a futuristic industrial grade broadband link placing us proudly at the forefront of technology. The underground; characterized by a convoluted labyrinth of expensive and obdurate wires is not an exclusive domain for industrial grade broadband. We need to actively examine the above ground alternative of WiMAX as a benchmark for cost, convenience of service, flexibility and economy of scale. A failure to do so would be accurately diagnosed as a chronic case of 'Tunnel Vision'.

