

By Sheri Hink

The Wauneta Breeze

High-quality telecommunications are easy to take for granted in today's fast-paced, internet-dependent world.

Luckily for those of us who are internet-dependent, there are those who focus on maintaining and advancing the technologies people use every day. Benkelman-based BWTelcom is dedicated to doing just that, despite the challenges they face due to vast landscapes and a comparably sparse population.

BWTelcom serves a 1,400 square mile territory, parts of which have a population density as small as 1.1 people per square mile.

The company is well known in Wauneta, and no doubt in the other communities it serves, as a leader within the community. They are looked upon as a leader not only for their good service and quality products, but also for their commitment to the well-being of the community and its residents.

Many area residents have commented on the continued generosity of BWTelcom within the community.

But, the public may be less familiar with the company's strategic approach to maintaining high-quality telecommunications services.

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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Every household within BWTelcom's territory has access to high speed internet, something that general manager Randy Raile is very proud of.

He explained BWTelcom is committed to serving the telecommunications needs of each customer within their territory, a commitment that comes with a hefty price tag.

According to Raile, it costs approximately \$15,000 per mile to lay fiber lines within the area.

Fiber optic lines allow for the most bandwidth, over one gigabyte per second.

BWTelcom also has copper DSL lines that provide high speed internet services.

The important part of the equation is that 100 percent of BWTelcom's customers have access to high speed internet, regardless of how remote their location may be.

BWTelcom and other rural telephone companies have been able to build the high speed fiber optic system in their services areas thanks to the support of federal and state subsidies from the Universal Services Fund (USF).

"The Nebraska Universal Service Fund administers programs to ensure that all Nebraskans have access to quality telecommunications and information services at affordable and comparable rates," explains the Nebraska Public Service Commission's website..

Recently, Eric Carstenson, president of the Nebraska Telecommunications Association was in Benkelman to discuss changes in the telecommunications industry, especially those associated with the federal and state USFs.

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In essence, rural telephone companies receive a subsidy from the USF to subsidize the high cost of doing business in a rural area.

Funding for the USF comes from consumers. Telecommunications customers currently pay a 17 percent federal USF tax and 6.95 percent state USF tax on their phone bills.

Last year, as the federal USF was reevaluated, rural telephone companies lost an average of 40 percent of their subsidy. Now, the subsidies companies receive from the state USF are also in question.

Consumers continue to fund the USF at the same rates for both federal and state USF taxes, the change has been where the USF subsidies go. Now, cellular companies are also getting a piece of the pie, which equates a loss to local telephone companies.

The losses seen to date are changing the way rural phone companies, such as BWTelcom are doing business.

One of the ways BWTelcom has combatted the loss in subsidies is by streamlining their operation.

As employees have left the company to pursue other interests the company has chosen to absorb their job duties and share them amongst other staff members. Their staff has gone from 19 employees down to 14 recently.

BWTelcom leadership is embracing the changes and working to provide the same quality of services to their customers.

“The only consistent thing is change,” said Raile.

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Raile went on to say his company is working to diversify their offerings, possibly by going into security and alarm services.

Change is nothing new to Raile, who heads the company. Raile is a 4th generation telephone man.

His grandfather moved the family into the area in 1944 when he purchased the Dundy County Mutual telephone company.

In 1980 the company expanded into the Wauneta area when it purchased the Wauneta Telephone Company from Bob Bradley. In 2006 it expanded again when BWTelcom purchased the Hartman Telephone Exchange which served the Danbury, Lebanon, Kan. and Haigler areas.