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"The Ruby Ranch Internet Co-operative Association hopes they have set an example and laid the groundwork for other small communities who have no access to the Internet and who want to follow suit."

The Ruby Ranch Internet Co-operative Association is succeeding in providing a high-speed digital subscriber line (DSL) Internet service to its neighbourhood. This barn houses some of the equipment required to provide this service.

The Ruby Ranch Subdivision is nestled in the mountains of the Colorado state. Because of the geography and the

High speed Internet can be for everyone

May 2002 By: Amanda Newman

Isolation has its perks. Anyone could appreciate the piece and quiet and the beautiful scenery of the Ruby Ranch Subdivision, nestled in the Colorado mountains. But isolation can also make some much-needed services harder to come by. This is what prompted this small community to pioneer a new Internet co-operative association unlike anything ever heard of until now.

A group of homeowners in the Ruby Ranch Subdivision has succeeded in providing high-speed digital subscriber line (DSL) Internet service to homes in their neighbourhood. Because of the mountainous layout of the land, offering connection to high-speed Internet service was not profitable for the local phone company and it seemed virtually impossible until Carl Oppedahl and the other homeowners decided to establish a DSL service on their own. Their initiative resulted in the not-for-profit Ruby Ranch Internet Co-operative Association.

Oppedahl says because their community is surrounded with forest and vegetation, wireless and cable connections to the Internet are not possible. DSL was the only logical solution to their problem.
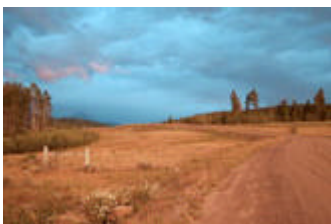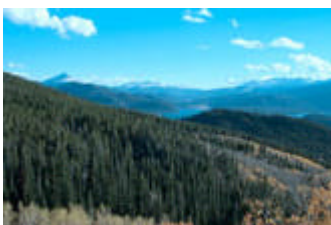
DSL is a very high-speed connection to the

the geography and the isolation, residents had not been able to access high-speed Internet through the local telephone company. This is why a group of homeowners decided to form the Ruby Ranch Internet Co-operative Association.

Internet that uses the same wires as a regular telephone line. The copper wires that telephone companies install for phone lines are capable of carrying more than just voice data, so DSL users can talk on the phone and be connected to the Internet simultaneously.

The Ruby Ranch Subdivision consists of 40 homes and eleven of those homeowners have joined the co-op.

Oppedahl, a lawyer and president of the co-op, says the co-operative was founded in September 2001 because the voice telephone service in the neighbourhood is of such poor quality that it is not possible to get to modem connections faster than about 26 kilobytes per second (kbps). This means it takes a long time to download a page from the Internet.

The co-op chose to create their own DSL service because no telephone company in the area offered DSL or modem access.

The co-op obtained a digital subscriber line access multiplexer (DSLAM) and the subscribers bought the DSL modems needed to access the service. The co-op has tested all of the technology and has ensured it is in good working order. The DSLAM, which is housed in a barn, is needed to receive customer connections.

"Volunteers donated tens of thousands of hours," says Oppedahl. The volunteers worked on system and equipment design, litigation, and many other aspects of the project. However, the implementation of this new service didn't go off without a hitch. Qwest Communications, a local telephone company, fought the start-up of the co-op. "They said if they did anything other than obstruct us, then they have to stop obstructing people who really compete with them," says Oppedahl.

The co-op needed access to some of the 400 subloops Qwest installed when the Ruby Ranch community was established more than 20 years ago. The subloops are necessary to connect the DSLAM to the subscriber homes

and are also needed for telephone use.

Under the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Qwest is required to work towards interconnection agreements for parties wanting to use subloop facilities. The co-op felt Qwest refused to negotiate in good faith, while Qwest said it was the co-op that refused to negotiate a reasonable agreement. The communications company also demanded the co-op take out an $11-million insurance policy ($1 million for each subscriber) and name it as the beneficiary.

The co-op filed an informal complaint with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) on September 4, 2001, and also pursued arbitration before the Colorado Public Service Commission (CoPUC). After months of litigation, CoPUC found that all of the co-op's equipment was compatible with the Qwest network and that it was technically able to provide its service to the co-operative. CoPUC found the co-op entitled to pay only wholesale rates for the subloops instead of the more expensive retail rates and the insurance policy was lowered to $1-million.

At the end of March 2002 an agreement was reached between Qwest and the co-op and now they are working together to get three remaining tasks under their belt. These include installing a buried cable between the barn and the cross-connect box (also called a Serving Area Interface), getting a Field Connection Point (FCP) installed at the cross-connect box, and getting subloops connected between the FCP and the subscriber homes. Qwest is obligated to have the FCP ready for service no later than Friday June 21, but has agreed to make the best efforts to have it installed sooner, says the co-op's Web site.
"They are just barely doing the minimum required by law," says Oppedahl of Qwest's progress.

Members pay the co-op $120 for a one-time connection fee and three months service in advance at $60 per month. Oppedahl estimated

the total cost to get the co-op up and running will be $11,000 number he says is lower because of the volunteer action. Oppedahl says their co-op will operate just like any other. They will have a board of directors, hold annual general meetings, and be member-owned. He also says they are strictly volunteer-based and any profits will be distributed among members.

The Ruby Ranch Internet Co-operative Association hopes they have set an example and laid the groundwork for other small communities who have no access to the Internet and who want to follow suit.

Oppedahl plans to post information on the co-op's Web site for others who want to launch their own DSL service. You can find the co-op at www.rric.net.

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