



Trade winds picking up Wi-Fi in Caribbean

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There's much talk these days about municipal Wi-Fi projects that aim to provide ubiquitous wireless broadband in densely populated communities.

City-owned Toronto Hydro, for example, announced last month it would blanket downtown with broadband wireless Internet access by summer, with plans to follow with full citywide deployment. Across North America — San Francisco, New York, New Orleans, Calgary and hundreds of other towns and cities — the trend is gaining momentum.

Unfortunately, less dense areas aren't part of this public access experiment. An example is a remote vacation resort without the infrastructure to offer blanket broadband coverage, but at the same time has a constant flow of visitors more than happy to pay for the benefits of high-speed Internet access.

Iain Grant didn't let that roadblock get in his way. Grant is managing director of the Seaboard Group, a telecom research firm with offices in Toronto and Montreal. But he and his wife — in a parallel postcard life — also own a marina (<http://www.erikamarine.com>) on a Caribbean island about 145 kilometres west of Barbados.

Erika's Marine Services' motto is, "Making life easier for the visiting Yachtsman." The marina helps visitors charter yachts and arrange day sails, tours, accommodations, and whatever else a tourist may need — DVD rentals, laundry service, a book exchange, you name it.

One of the latest service additions? Yachts anchored in the harbour or tied dockside can now get high-speed Internet access through a new Wi-Fi system that collects payment through Visa, MasterCard, American Express and PayPal.

"We deployed a test system over Christmas," says Grant. "Boats in the harbour got the signal. With some radio-frequency optimization from the Linksys Wi-Fi units we managed to get about 800 metres of coverage."

This wasn't just about plugging in a wireless router and turning it on. Getting the signal deep into the harbour required buying cantennas, which are basically antennas that can focus a Wi-Fi beam and boost the signal.

These makeshift devices were originally built using Pringles chip cans, but a tin can works just as well. You can learn how to build one yourself through a simple search on Google. Grant bought his from TigerDirect.ca.

The advantage of cantennas is that they're directional. Grant, for example, aims a 30-degree beam directly at the harbour. Sometimes he'll point the service to a cluster of local bars so they can provide a Wi-Fi happy hour to customers.

At times the signals can get blocked by big ferries and ships. But most of the time the cantennas do the trick.

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The next challenge was to figure out a way of both selling the service and collecting money. That's where Jasper Nuyens, founder of Belgium-based LinSpot (<http://www.linspot.com>), entered the picture.

You may remember a column I wrote about LinSpot roughly two years ago. At the time Nuyens was promoting the idea of Wi-Fi users becoming Wi-Fi sellers by sharing their signal with any passer-by that wanted to tap it — for a small fee..

LinSpot's software securely partitions a Wi-Fi network, allowing home and business operators to stipulate who gets free access and who must pay. LinSpot dictates the costs, which at that time ranged from \$3.25 for two hours to \$33 a month. Payment provided access to any LinSpot location globally, and if a passer-by happened to use your network LinSpot would pay you an 85 per cent cut according to the visitor's surfing time.

Cool idea, and one that has since attracted some high-profile interests. A Spanish-based company called FON, which offers similar Wi-Fi sharing software, recently snagged a \$22 million (U.S.) investment from Google, Skype and some other big-name venture capitalists back in February.

Nuyens says that investment brought a lot of credibility to the concept of Wi-Fi sharing, but he's not so sure there's a viable business model behind it. So far, LinSpot has had more than 10,000 downloads, an impressive number that has not translated into revenues.

"Our experience tells us that not many people actually buy Internet access like that," he says. "We think that the major problem is that the amount of free Wi-Fi without any security is so large that it's very hard to compete with it. So business-wise it just doesn't work."

Nuyens decided to change his strategy. He came up with a professional version of his software, which lets hotels, resorts, marinas and other establishments off the beaten path become their own wireless service providers.

Good news for Grant. He'd heard about LinSpot and gave Nuyens a call. By January the Belgian was on a plane heading for the Caribbean to set up his LinSpot Professional software, which Grant liked because it worked on Apple and Linux-based computers.

"We don't do Windows on this island," says Grant.

Imagine you're aboard a yacht, just anchored about 100 metres from the marina, and you decide to download some digital songs from the Web for your on-board MP3 system. After opening up your laptop and selecting the Wi-Fi network, you see a custom-made welcome screen that says "Erika's Marine."

Registration with a credit card or PayPal information is next, after which the software connects over the Internet — through a single DSL line at the marina — to a LinSpot computer server based in Belgium. That server quickly authenticates the transaction and issues a password. The revenues are then split up every month.

"LinSpot takes a few points for its trouble and support and pays the rest to Erika's via PayPal," says Grant, adding that he likes the fact he can target who pays and who doesn't.

For example, he and his wife help build and manage apartments for the Roman Catholic Church, which owns property on the island. Internet access there is offered for free as a courtesy while those in the harbour are required to pay.

Grant says the LinSpot system works well, but there was one unexpected hitch. An old Linux-based PC he was using basically blew up — a combination of bad island power and trade winds that blew salt into the computer's circuitry. He had Nuyens fly in a Mac Mini from Belgium as a replacement.

For Nuyens, Erika's Marine is just the start. He's now doing similar projects in Italy and the Middle East

and hopes as word spreads about LinSpot Professional that business will start to take off.

Grant says there are many areas in Canada where such a system would be ideal. It seems a fit for marinas — and boaters — along the Trent-Severn Waterway, or any remote resort locations that want to make a little money on the side by offering a service that many tourists want, and will pay for.

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