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Business

Plugged in to Loma Linda's future

TECH TRIP: Nearly 30 cities visit this week to see how fiber optics can connect a community.

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By **PAUL HERRERA**
The Press-Enterprise

The 21st century technology of seamless teleconferencing, doctors checking on patients and virtual classrooms is all limited by how much data you can stuff through the wires that run to your home.

Loma Linda, in a pioneering move, became the first municipality to seek to eliminate the limits as part of the building code. Communities and businesses around the nation are taking note.

The city hosted a two-day conference this week, bringing together 29 municipalities and about 100 attendees to display the backbone of a telecommunications-connected community.

The conference attracted staff from cities such as Boise, Idaho, and Surprise, Ariz., hoping to take home ideas to develop a wired community.

Two years ago, Loma Linda approved a law requiring all newly constructed homes and heavily remodeled ones to be wired with fiber optics.

The wiring, along with a control panel added about \$3,000 to the cost of each home. City officials hoped the cost would be a pittance compared to the benefit of planning a potentially cutting-edge community.

The conference represents part of that payoff. James Hettrick, director of information systems for Loma Linda and a chief architect of the technology initiative, said the recognition offers a small city a higher profile in the region and the nation.

"It gives us a seat at a table that a community like ours usually could not join," said Hettrick.

Hettrick said the city is in talks with technology companies interested in tapping into the fiber-backbone to make Loma Linda a test audience for services and equipment that conventional wiring can't support.

The city, home to Loma Linda University & Medical Center, is also a likely laboratory for telemedicine -- aspects of which are already in planning and preparing to roll out, Hettrick said.

Michael Render, principal of Tulsa, Okla.-based RVA Research, which tracks technology nationwide, said fewer than 500,000 homes, or one half of 1 percent, are wired to the level of every new home in Loma Linda. Though telecommunications seemed to grow at light speed, Render said it's actually been hindered by the slow growth of broadband.

"Even your standard commercial Web sites today are at best crude because of capability issues," Render said. New possibilities in video and interactivity are held back by the fact that most people couldn't access the services.

Steven S. Ross, editor of Broadband Properties Magazine, a trade publication based in Rosenberg, Texas, said Loma Linda offered a unique set of circumstances that made its ground-breaking law possible. With a highly educated population and eager city officials, Loma Linda had the right people to make the investment a priority. Those factors dovetailed with soaring property values that took the sting out of the extra cost, Ross said.

So far, no other cities are following the example of mandatory fiber connections. Some, like Surprise, a Phoenix suburb of 96,000, are promoting the initiative but say they're likely to stop short of forcing it on builders via local ordinances.

Loma Linda's work promises to embolden other small cities who realize they don't need big metropolitan resources to make a splash, Hettrick said.

"Cities look at themselves and say, 'We'll never be Seattle,'" Hettrick said. "Now they can see Loma Linda doing it."

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WIRED

Loma Linda approved a law in 2004 requiring the installation of fiber optics in all newly constructed and refurbished homes.

Fiber optics will be installed in more than 5,000 new homes

Cost to install fiber optics is up to \$3,500 for each home

SOURCE: City of Loma Linda