

Kemp, Texas, Boots CenturyLink, Goes Wireless

Colin Wood | May 12, 2015



Officials in the city of Kemp, Texas, decided in January that they'd had enough of CenturyLink, the DSL Internet and phone provider, after repeated outages. The city of 1,100 residents began a new contract with local wireless Internet provider [One Ring Networks](#) and says the move saved money, established a more reliable infrastructure to support the city's phone and Internet systems, and severed a difficult relationship that was going nowhere.

Users in the city now each have access to their own 5 Mbps symmetrical connection powered by wireless equipment that One Ring Networks installed atop the city's water tower. The signal provides coverage for the entire city and outlying areas, officials reported. That's enough connectivity for city operations, while also providing citizens an alternative broadband provider should they also choose to abandon CenturyLink. At least a few dozen citizens were on a waiting list to make the switch when it became evident that improvements in CenturyLink's reliability would not be forthcoming, said Regina Kiser, city administrator.

At one point, the city lost its Internet connection for five days. "That was the last straw because that was detrimental to us, because we depend on the Internet so much more, especially with our phone system," said Kiser. "We had just gone with the voice over IP [Internet protocol] when our system went down for five days, so you try to call city hall about various things, including the police department, and there was no phone. So, that was horrible."

But the outages weren't affecting everyone. Alan Spears, owner of a local CCTV manufacturing company called Rugged Cams, said that his connection almost never went down, with the longest outage being just a couple of hours. Spears noted that his building was located just across the street from the switching office, so maybe he was getting the best of it. He did say that any outages would be bad for his business, since his company allows customers from around the world to connect to his DVRs every day. Kiser said the city had pleaded with CenturyLink to upgrade its equipment so the outages would stop, but that it's hard to get a big company to listen when your city only has about 1,000 people.

"If you're a government entity and you call in, they send you into cyberspace somewhere and your phone just rings and rings and rings, and I guess there's just not any commission to be made on cities from what I'm understanding," Kiser said. "This problem's been going on for about a year, as far as not having the power we need to run our court program. So we tried, but it was just impossible to deal with CenturyLink."

CenturyLink spokesperson Steve Hanik told *Government Technology* via email that they were surprised to discover the city was switching Internet providers.

"We were in the process of upgrading area equipment to resolve issues that had been brought to our attention," Hanik wrote. "As a customer-focused company, we are committed to providing the best quality broadband experience in rural and urban areas. We are proud of the investment, bringing 10 Mbps service, we have made in Kemp."

"I'd take them up on that," Kiser said in response to CenturyLink's statement. "That's not accurate at all. They just do what they're going to do, and they basically said 'This all

we have and this is all we're going to do,' and just went on their way. They were sorry to hear we were changing, but the people who were working for them seemed to know that they only had what they had to offer and didn't seem interested in upgrading."

Kiser added that she was switching the city's phone service over to One Ring Networks because it's a service-oriented company and she likes how it does business.

"CenturyLink's been the only game in town for so long, they took advantage of the situation and they're probably freaking out now that they have some competition for the first time," Kiser said.

Switching to a wireless connection required a high vantage point so the signal could reach One Ring Networks' towers in the neighboring cities of Kaufman and Athens, some 10 and 30 miles away, respectively. Kris Maher, vice president of One Ring Networks, said he views the arrangement with Kemp as more of a public-private partnership than strictly a business relationship.

One Ring Networks didn't charge the city for installation, just a flat rate of about \$450 a month for the equipment. In exchange, the company got another node on its growing wireless network without the usual rental costs and gained an opportunity to sell voice and data packages to citizens at about \$80 a pop.

"In these towns, the types of issues for these residents is that there isn't a choice and they don't have the ability to get high-speed Internet. The incumbent carrier ... really doesn't offer higher packages," Maher said. "So when we come in, we offer higher speeds at a lower price than they're used to paying, so they're getting a double benefit."

The way Internet providers like CenturyLink advertise their speeds is deceptive, Maher explained, because they might say they offer 10 Mbps, but that's a maximum speed for a shared service, which can often be slower than a dedicated 5 Mbps connection.

"That means that no matter who else is on our network, they are going to get their dedicated 5 Mbps by 5 Mbps speed carved out just for them," Maher said. "With the other carriers, that 10 Mbps by whatever is a best effort service, which means it can go up to 10 Mbps, but 10 Mbps isn't guaranteed. Ours is right at 5 and it's always going to be at 5, no matter who else is on our network."

Maher described Kemp as a typical quiet Texas town with a small main street lined with restaurants and antique shops. Kiser said she was born in Kemp in the 1960s, left for a decade after she graduated, then came back and stayed because she realized it was home.

"It's good to be able to do something like this," she said. "You kind of have a passion when it's your hometown."

Kiser said the upgrade was fairly painless and that people are happy with the service they're getting from the new provider. There was a delay in installing the wireless equipment because the water tower was icy, but the switch in providers is saving the city hundreds of dollars each month, she said, in addition to being more reliable for the government buildings, the bank and the school.

For other small cities that are unsatisfied with their Internet providers, Kiser suggested they look at other companies and modes of getting service because there are options out there.

Editor's Note: Minor edits were made to this story on May 13, 2015.

<http://www.govtech.com/network/Kemp-Texas-Boots-CenturyLink-Goes-Wireless.html>