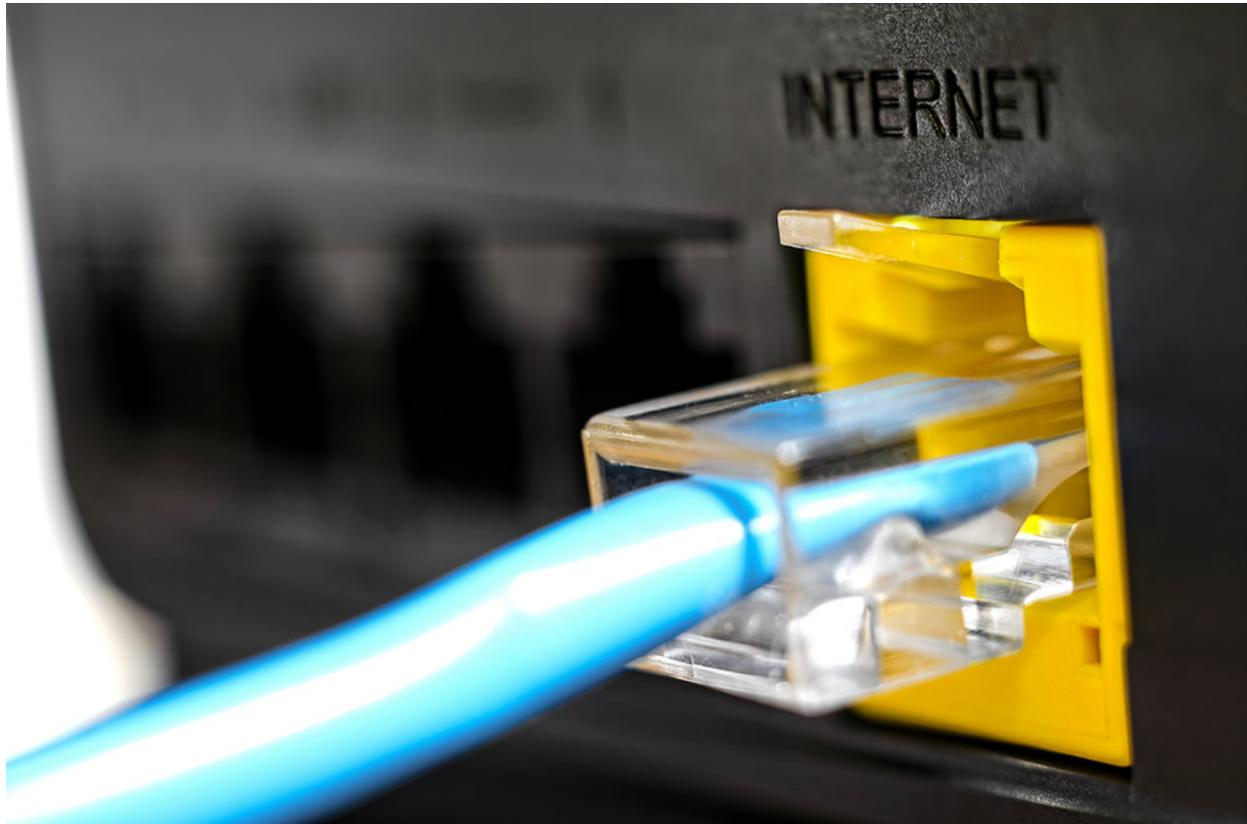


## DIY Internet Bridges Rural Connection Gap

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(TNS) — One of the trade-offs you make when you move to the peace and quiet of a rural community is that you say goodbye to big city amenities like high-speed internet service. But not in West Marin’s Dillon Beach, Calif.

A seaside enclave in the far northwest corner of the county, Dillon Beach is perhaps Marin’s most isolated community, and yet it boasts a fiber-optic, high-speed wireless internet service with unlimited data for a flat fee of \$50 a month. There’s no charge for installation or equipment rental, either.

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Until dad came to the rescue, there had been no affordable, efficient service in that remote neck of the woods. Kuykendall now serves 170 of his neighbors in this village of some 400 homes. After working through a long waiting list, he still adds a couple of new customers every week.

“Last Labor Day weekend, when everyone was out here for the holiday, I couldn’t walk outside because so many people were stopping me, asking, ‘Can we get hooked up?’”

he said one morning this week in “Command Central,” a space in his garage that his internet operation shares with his mountain bike and fishing gear.

On a plywood wall, electronic devices with blinking green lights surround the fiber optic cable from AT&T that runs into his garage from a nearby telephone pole. He monitors the system over five computer screens powered by a pair of laptops. Paraphrasing Han Solo, he compares it to the Millennium Falcon starship in “Star Wars.”

“It may not look like much,” he said, “but it sure is fast.”

## **Changing lives**

You won’t hear any complaints about Kuykendall’s service from customer Terry Woodard, a physician for Kaiser Permanente in Santa Rosa who has lived in Dillon Beach for eight years. She and her partner, a San Francisco paralegal, often work from home and were desperately unhappy with the satellite internet companies they’d been saddled with before.

“All the different internet providers we went through had been a nightmare,” she said. “In cost, data limits and service, they’ve all been terrible. Then Brandt (Kuykendall) came along with 50 bucks a month and unlimited data. It seemed too good to be true. I was expecting slow speed and poor service, but I was wrong. Because the speed and the service is so good, we ditched DirectTV. Now we just stream content. Both financially and service wise, it’s really remarkable how it changed our lives.”

## **His Luddite phase**

A Marin native, Kuykendall grew up in San Rafael, graduating from Terra Linda High School in 1988. He worked as a product manager for Sonic Solutions, a digital audio and video company in Novato, before starting his own multimedia business in Salt Lake City in 2008.

After he moved his family into a small house his parents owned in Dillon Beach in 2011, he tried running his company from home, but the lack of internet access was one of the reasons he eventually shut it down. Tired of tech, he escaped into what he calls “my Luddite phase.” “I canceled my cellphone and was spending my days out on the water, crabbing, oyster farming, spear fishing, all that kind of stuff,” he said.

That lasted until his daughter, Emma, now a 19-year-old student at UC Berkeley, told him she had to have internet service to keep up with her school work at Petaluma High. She was having to stay late at school to use its internet access, hangout in libraries until they closed or find cafes and grocery stores with free Wi-Fi.

“It was right in the middle of my I-don’t -want-to-have-anything-to-do-with-technology phase,” he said. “I resisted for about a year until I realized it was a burden on my daughter, and she didn’t need that.”

He initially got her onto a Verizon wireless internet service, but that was getting more expensive each month. One day his wife, Kelli, the postmistress of Dillon Beach, came home with the bill that broke the camel’s back.

“The bill was for \$707,” he recalled ruefully. “I was in the middle of painting the house. I stopped right then and said, ‘There’s got to be a better way to do this.’ And that was the impetus that got this going. I still haven’t finished painting my house.”

In the beginning, he fashioned a system using a router and cellphone modems operating off a wireless service tower. It allowed him to supply internet service to his house and about 25 of his immediate neighbors. But that was the extent of its range. At the same time, so many others in the community were asking for service that he began thinking bigger. That’s when he took the plunge and contracted with AT&T to have fiber optic cable connected to his garage. Antennas on his roof deliver the broadband signal to small plastic dishes on customers’ homes.

### **‘Gift to community’**

While Kuykendall had some tech savvy from his previous business experience, it took trial and error, patience and a kind of can-do spirit to build a system that is pretty much state-of-the-art.

“It started out with me trying to get internet for myself and it totally grew organically,” he said. “With the backing of the community it makes sense financially.”

Being a new kid on the internet provider block, he doesn’t yet know how the impending repeal of net neutrality rules will affect him.

“The guy in charge of the FCC says he’s talked to all these small internet service providers who sound like me and they say they really wanted the ending of net neutrality because it was costing them extra money and creating barriers to them expanding,” he said. “But I didn’t really have anything like that to deal with. It’s kind of the Wild West out here.”

He’s already feeling some pressure to expand to Tomales, the small town just to the east, and possibly down the coast to Bolinas. Because he has infinitely more capacity than he’s using, that kind of growth is entirely possible.

“But I’m torn about that,” he said, stressing that he didn’t start the business as an opportunity to make a lot of money. “Right now I really want to focus on Dillon Beach. This is a great job, and it allows me to stay here. I don’t need a \$3 million home on the hill. I’m happy where I am. I hope I don’t say this naively, but this is more like a gift to the community.”

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