



Doug Frazier (r.) and partner Stuart Reid in Urban Telephone and Video office in South Bronx. Photo by Andrew Savulich/Daily News

Look out big telecom! Bronx biz offers buildings free WiFi

Met Time Warner and Verizon's worst nightmare. Ever dreamed of free broadband Internet for your home? Or of phone and television service that doesn't burn a hole in your pocket each month?

How about a free video surveillance camera to deter crime on your block or building?

All that is slowly becoming real for thousands of low-income tenants and small businesses in one of New York's poorest neighborhood, the South Bronx.

It's called Home Networking Services, a wireless broadband network the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation (SoBRO) has been quietly erecting for the past few years in a joint venture with a small minority-owned firm called Urban Telephone and Video.

In the Mott Haven public housing projects, tenant president John Johnson raves about the Virtual Tenant Patrol the new network made possible.

"It used to be that our tenants had to sit in the lobby every night, checking to make sure only residents and their guests came in the building," Johnson said.

"Now we have cameras in the lobby and any resident can watch who comes in and out through their own WiFi connection over their computer at home."

The New York City Public Housing Authority first opposed the cameras, but then relented and allowed the network into the St. Mary's and Mitchell Houses as well.

"We want them in all 32 housing developments in the South Bronx," Johnson said.

The same WiFi network also permits residents in those projects to surf the Internet — for free. All they have to do is register with the Home Networking Service.

"Our mission is to bring the Internet to everyone for free or for as low a cost as possible," said company president Doug Frazier, who is also a founder of the nonprofit Digital Divide Partnership.

To the average visitor, the cramped headquarters of Frazier's Urban Telephone on E. 149th St. seems more like some telecom dumping ground than a real live business.

Its ceilings and walls are a jumble of exposed cable lines, all of which hook up to a half-dozen hand-me-down servers, computer terminals and surveillance video screens.

From this tiny nerve center, Frazier, his partner, Columbia University graduate Stuart Reid, and a handful of employees have dared to challenge the prevailing view that only the giant cable and phone companies can successfully provide the public with Internet, phone and video service.

"We're bottom feeders," said Frazier, a former advertising guerrilla marketer and a technological genius. "We go after

the people who can't afford cable television."

The firm got its start with Internet service when several nonprofit housing developers in Harlem and the South Bronx hired Urban Telephone to provide fiberoptic wire for broadband service to new housing units.

"We used those existing fiber connections to start putting up WiFi nodes all over the community," Frazier said.

Using a state grant and with NYCHA's support, they have expanded the reach of their WiFi network.

"They're a wonderful group who are serving their community," said Councilwoman Gale Brewer, head of the Technology in Government Committee.

Brewer recently helped obtain more than \$28 million of federal broadband stimulus money for city schools and is backing Frazier's efforts to get money from a second round of federal broadband grants.

Frazier is even using the same wireless network to offer the community low-cost Internet phone service and TV, simply by taking advantage of advances like Sling, an application that provides TV shows to your home computer or your wireless phone.

"We can offer Internet phone service for \$15 a month and TV for another \$15," he said.

The number of his TV channels are limited to 50, but with the free Internet it means Frazier can offer his own version of the triple play — for just \$30 a month.

And, yes, this is all happening in the South Bronx.

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