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News

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Bronx Beats Babbio to Broadband Video
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UrbanDSL – Stuart Reid and Douglas Frazier - are delivering video over fiber to the basement/VDSL while Verizon hasn't even gotten serious about trials in the city. Pacesetters Reid and Frazier were also among the first to offer VOIP, reselling Vonage under the original deal many couldn't understand three years ago. They've even secured a municipal franchise, something the Bells, among the world's best lobbyists, say can't be done.

Forget burned out buildings, street gangs, and streets unsafe for masters of the universe. Some brutal poverty remains, but today's Bronx also provides rich business opportunities. "Everyone in the neighborhood tries to find a way to get their kids a computer and the internet," Frazier says of his customers.

Urban's IPTV is entrepreneurship at the most demanding. They've led the crews trenching the fiber, trained people from the neighborhood to do the installs, and searched the country for used equipment to keep the price low. Their NOC, a stone's throw from Verizon's central office, is crowded with racks of Next Level, Tut, and other respected gear. Frazier and Reid manage Urban themselves, making sales calls training staff and troubleshooting 3 a.m. emergencies. They've worked together for twenty years, building urban cable systems and acquiring, along the way, the skills needed to create a working system that trumps a dozen small telcos' much publicized video trials. They deliver more to their users, at a better price, than many companies with ten times the resources.

A subway ride away from Verizon headquarters, Urban is proving IPTV can be done. Of course running five million Verizon lines is a different challenge than 5,000, but Verizon can no longer say serving the Bronx is impossible.
One million New Yorkers can get free WiFi through 187 access points across Harlem, the South Bronx, and Brooklyn in the neighborhoods that need it most. If your WiFi can see smartnetnyc, urbanwifitvor smartnetnych, you should be able to register on the splash page that comes up. When I visited them Saturday, 392 users had logged in by 1:30, although until now they have had zero publicity. On the left is a solar powered access point on top of a Harlem college building and on the right an access point map across Harlem and the Bronx. Traffic has recently gone from 30 gigabytes a week to 30 gig a day, a terabyte/month.

Meraki mesh networks like this have proven extraordinarily effective wiring communities. John Bicket and Sanjit Biswas created the company out of the work they did at MIT on Project Rooftop, connecting much of Cambridge. After initial excitement about mesh, many results were disappointing but Meraki is now being praised by users and the technology is deployed in 143 countries. Cisco has also provided important gear and support.

Nearly all the outreach has been via twitter, http://twitter.com/smartnetnyc. The style is informal; a node went down in a snowstorm and the announcement was "we'll fix it after it stops snowing."

It's all coordinated from an equipment filled small office in the South Bronx by Doug Frazier and Stu Reid, who have been bringing cable TV and the Internet to the South Bronx since 1986. Nearly all the projects for "sustainable broadband development" that are based on education/information have had dismal results. In particular, the Connect Kentucky program when you examine the data has been worse than useless by their criteria. Nearly none of the other programs have incorporated a serious look at the results - and most had almost none. Initially, the stimulus was ready to spend $750M on similar programs, but by late fall I heard they were instead targeting "as little as the statue requires" $250M. In March at the Columbia-Georgetown event, academics and others cast serious doubt of most claims of "demand stimulus." By December, the most respected D.C. expert on the subject told me privately he had seen no evidence any of the programs really worked.

"Older folks often think technology is a young people thing. When the kids are in the buildings putting in the radios, people ask for help. It's not a formal program, but it works."

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Solar AP

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