

The Washington Post

County Takes Networking To New Level *Software, Web Equipment Facilitate Online Meetings*

By Michael Alison Chandler
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, August 18, 2005; LZ01

When Loudoun County officials held their first meeting on the 2006 budget in early August, budget officer Ben May was vacationing at home in Colonial Beach, Va. Rather than drive 100 miles to Leesburg, he participated in the discussions via a Web cam.

"It reminded me of Max Headroom," said county Administrator Kirby M. Bowers, who ran the meeting at the County Government Center in Leesburg. Max Headroom was the star of a 1980s science fiction television series who looked like a computer-animated talking head.

The meeting was conducted using teleworking software provided by the Telework Consortium, a Herndon-based nonprofit organization established in 2002 with a \$2.4 million grant from the U.S. Commerce Department.



Telework, which sets up pilot programs to promote telecommuting, provides technical assistance and can supply basic materials: a microphone, a Web camera, software that transmits sound over broadband to facilitate conversation and an optical feature that streams live video, allowing participants to see one another. There is also a "white board" feature for viewing or editing documents online, in real time.

"Now we are really at a point where technology gives us a lot more options" for telecommuting, Bowers said, which can mean less office space to rent, fewer vehicles on the road and perhaps even increased productivity.

Five to 7 percent of the county's 3,000 employees telecommute part or full time, according to Julie Withrow, assistant to the county administrator. The goal is to have 10 to 15 percent of county employees telecommuting in the next few years, said Withrow, who surveyed every department six months ago.

The county began using the Telework program for the budget process, which often calls for long, late hours, but the program could be extended to other county departments, Bowers said.

County officials also plan to use the technology during the General Assembly's next session. The county's legislative liaison will use the software to keep officials in Loudoun informed without having to drive back and forth from Richmond.

Supervisor Lori L. Waters (R-Broad Run) is a vocal advocate of telecommuting "so that people can spend more time with their families and less time in traffic," she said.

Waters said she also supports extending broadband countywide, so residents have access to the high-speed Internet necessary for telecommuting. The county recently hired a broadband manager, who determined that nearly one-third of Loudoun's 91,000 households do not have access to high-speed Internet.

Waters and her assistant, Danny Davis, both have home offices equipped by the Telework Consortium, and they have online meetings. Waters said the technology is especially useful to her now because she is expecting her first child in about a month and plans to work at home more often.

On Friday, Waters plans to try out the software on constituents. Instead of driving from her home in Lansdowne to meet with them in person, her assistant will set up his laptop in the conference room at the County Government Center. From there, the constituents will direct questions on rezoning and land use to Waters's image on a screen and talk to her on a speaker phone.

The Telework Consortium has worked with other organizations in the area, including Amendment 1 Inc., the publisher of Loudoun Magazine and a land-use planning firm that kept a prized employee even though she had to move out of the area because of her husband's job, said Rita Mace Walston, Telework's general manager.

Local companies interested in telecommuting can also turn to another program. Telework!Va reimburses companies in Northern Virginia as much as \$35,000 to set up home offices and establish policies. The pilot program is based in Washington and is financed by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.

The Dulles Area Transportation Association, a nonprofit organization that promotes telecommuting, recently conducted an e-mail survey of 4,000 residents in South Riding and neighboring communities. Fourteen percent of the 881 respondents said they telework at least one or two days a week, and 26 percent said they did not telework but would like to.

Walston said translating that interest to employers can be a challenge when managers take the attitude of "if I can't see you, how do I know you are working?" instead of taking a performance-based approach.

But with the gridlock and strain that growth has brought to Loudoun, Walston said, telecommuting can improve everyone's life.

For example, she said she popped her head into the budget officers' meeting last week before it began. Mays was playing with his dog at home while others were milling around waiting for a few stragglers stuck in traffic.

"What would you rather do -- play with your dog or get stuck in traffic?" she asked.