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**Internet companies seeing increased demand during pandemic**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Internet companies are adjusting to the increase in demand as more Wisconsinites work, learn and play “safer at home.”

“Every day in this COVID-19 world is a new day for us,” said AT&T Plains States President Scott VanderSanden.

So it is with other telecom companies, large and small.

Northern Telephone and Data, a provider in the Fox Valley region for about 27 years, has seen an increase of at least 35 percent in residential bandwidth use.

“Where we are not having any problems is where our new fiber-optic network is,” William Miller, president of NTD, told WisBusiness.com. He added that the fiber-optic network is only at about 30 percent to 40 percent capacity.

“Where we’re struggling is in our older copper networks that are rural customers,” he said. “Those networks are getting stressed upwards of 80 to 90 percent of capacity.”

He said that while nobody is without service, NTD is seeing some customers struggle in rural areas.

“The copper technology just doesn’t allow the greater bandwidth, so people are maxing out those systems.”

But Miller said massive improvements are underway in rural areas across the state.

“There is a lot of fiber to home bills, fiber to business bills; you’re going to see our internet in Wisconsin making leaps and bounds in the rural areas ahead of where it’s at,” he said.

Drew Petersen, senior vice president of corporate affairs at TDS, a national provider headquartered in Madison, said the peak usage time has shifted from 8 p.m. to 11 a.m. due to more customers working from home and online schooling activity.

TDS has seen an 80 percent increase in bandwidth consumption, “but because usage smooths over the course of the day, we are staying ahead of it,” said Petersen. And in Wisconsin, usage levels drop when weather conditions are favorable for being outside.

“The biggest challenge we have faced is from customers who have connectivity but are experiencing WiFi issues in the home and also virtual private network challenges with their IT systems from work,” said Petersen.

Through a larger national lens, CenturyLink’s communications manager Stephanie Meisse, said the biggest change is a steady stream of traffic from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m and a bump in the network at the top of each hour due to the use of video collaboration tools such as Zoom.

CenturyLink’s traffic peak is still in the evenings between 5 p.m. and 11 p.m. just as before COVID-19, but is 35 percent higher, “with gaming and video being the two largest contributors, respectively.”

She said home WiFi and broadband networks are feeling pressure as people use their connection for work, learning and entertainment. CenturyLink is encouraging its customers to reduce non-essential applications and limit their gaming and streaming during daytime hours.

Even service giants such as AT&T are experiencing challenges with increased demand.

AT&T has closed 12 stores in Wisconsin due to COVID-19 along with reduced hours and a travel ban. But they are offering curbside pickup and designated hours for people most vulnerable to coronavirus.

According to VanderSanden, AT&T is seeing an 18 percent increase month over month.

“That is really, really unprecedented obviously with many folks working from home,” he said. “Many business districts are seeing less employees in the office; we are seeing changes in our traffic patterns.”

He said in the last three weeks on wireless networks, people are making 35 percent more voice calls, sending 63 percent more instant messages and 41 percent more texts.

On the other hand, VanderSanden reported that emailing is down 18 percent and web browsing is down 5 percent.

“Video traffic is up four percent — that increase accounts for over 50 percent of the increase on our wireless network,” he said, noting that video is more data-intensive than the WiFi activities.

For businesses: global audio conferencing is up 200 percent; audio, web and video conferencing is up 400 percent; and webcasts are up 200 percent.

“Many of our websites are managed, if you will, by artificial intelligence,” VanderSanden said. “Our computers and our artificial intelligence systems in place are essentially observing traffic loads on those cell sites and making adjustments on the fly that allow us to add a little capacity in certain places.”

Downtown Madison is one of those places that is seeing less traffic compared to three weeks ago, according to VanderSanden. By taking down those cell sites, AT&T can save some bandwidth.

“We’re trying to be extremely cognizant of making sure people can get connected,” he said. “Our network, we believe, is doing very well running against that standard.’’

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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