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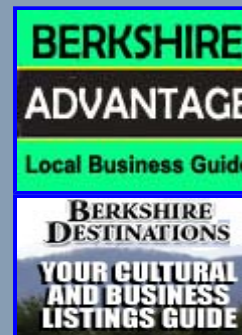
By Scott Stafford, Berkshire Eagle Staff
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Thursday, April 05

PITTSFIELD — Among the amenities finding their way to North Street is a growth in wireless Internet access, which some say could have the affect of drawing younger, tech savvy residents to the area to live, work and play.

Currently offering wireless access to customers or residents are Digital Blend, a coffee shop

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on North Street near Park Square; Bellissimo Dolce, a cafe at the corner of North Street and Maple Avenue; the apartments in the Greystone Building, which are in the same building as Bellissimo Dolce; and the condos and storefronts at 433 North Street.

According to Deanna Ruffer, community development director for Pittsfield, the city doesn't have an effort under way to expand those offerings.

"But wireless access is growing and that's something we have a strong interest in," she said.

Using wireless Internet access, a person with a laptop computer can log onto the Internet and to do work, communicate with colleagues, family or friends via e-mail, surf the web, shop online, and just about anything else one can accomplish using a hard-wire hookup.

A proponent of wireless access, North Street developer George Whaling has made it available to the residents and workers in two of his seven properties, the Greystone Building and 433 North St.

His intention, he noted, is to add it to his other properties at the rate of about one per year.

Aaron Brown, a tenant in Greystone, said the addition of wireless access was an unexpected amenity, and an unexpected savings. He recently terminated his Internet service at a savings of about \$35 per month.

"These days, the Internet is a necessity, not a luxury," Brown said. "And when he (Whaling) gave that to us, the rent didn't go up. So that was nice."

"This is just an additional amenity to differentiate us from the competition, increase retention, and attract a younger demographic," Whaling said. "Where my payoff will be is a higher occupancy rate, less turnover and more satisfied, respectful tenants."

At a cost between \$5,000 and \$6,000, Whaling said, signal-boosting antennae are installed at strategic points throughout the building. The users need an access code to get online, but once that's done, they are free to roam the world wide Web from anywhere in the building.

Real estate broker Karl Volkman lives and works in his condo at 433 North St., so he uses the Internet quite a bit from his home.

"It's fantastic — not having to plug in is a big plus," he said. "And since Bellissimo Dolce is just across the street, I have a lot of business meetings there. So wireless access is helpful there, too."

Volkman said he'd like to see the whole area go wireless, like other cities have done, and like North Adams is considering.

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"I'd like to be able to go online and look at listings sitting in my car, so the more the better," he said.

"Wireless is great to have," agreed condominium owner Ronald J. Kelly III. "I find that it's certainly adequate to do what I need to do, and it's also great because I have a laptop — it keeps me mobile."

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