

Tourism White Rock unveils free Wi-Fi



From left, Betina Albornoz, Marji Graham, Michelle Herlihy, Fred Fabro and Judy Laurel test the network.

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Published: July 15, 2010 3:00 PM

Updated: July 15, 2010 4:23 PM

White Rock beach is now a BlueZone.

As of this week, waterfront visitors can access free Wi-Fi and receive tourism info on the city via their Bluetooth. The combination is hoped to boost business and draw more people to stay, play and connect to White Rock. And the tourism focus makes it a first in Canada, those behind the network say.

“As far as I know, no one’s ever done it anywhere in the world,” said Blue Jamb Media’s Michelle Herlihy, who suggested the concept to South Surrey and White Rock Chamber of Commerce officials about six months ago.

“Making sure people are aware of what’s going on in town... getting information to people while they’re here, it’s very powerful.”

The BlueZone pilot project – sponsored in part by Peace Arch News – went live Wednesday. Extending east from Whitby’s Books & Gifts and west from the Sandpiper Pub, it features 14 access points that send video content on current local events and happenings to Bluetooth-enabled cellphones. As well, each hotspot has a Wi-Fi function that enables the content to reach those with devices, such as laptops, iPhones, Blackberrys and other Internet-accessible gear.

Last but not least, the Wi-Fi splash page links to a Tourism White Rock app, providing one-click access to the organization, mandated to be most in-the-know about what’s happening where in the city. It’s in-the-moment information that Tourism White Rock’s Betina Albornoz says those riding the mobile-technology wave crave. The 21st century traveller plans on-the-go, she said, often choosing where to stay and what to do based on information they can glean from one click of a button. Albornoz said she sees the trend firsthand every time she’s at the waterfront tourism kiosk. One in three people are using their mobiles – and not to talk, she noted

Wednesday, Herlihy saw a roller blader checking his iPhone as he bladed along Marine Drive. “Everybody is on their mobile devices,” the Peninsula resident said. The privately funded network was installed along the beach by Blue Jamb at a cost of about \$55,000. Businesses hosting access points provide the Internet connection in exchange for the opportunity to market themselves within the mobile space.

Each of the 14 hotspots can hit up to 21 cellphones simultaneously. Network software ensures no user receives the same content twice, Herlihy noted. And, as it is permission-based, no one is forced to receive the content. Right now, those with Bluetooth-enabled devices who take advantage of prompts inviting them to view promotional videos will learn about events including this weekend’s Tour de White Rock and the July 30 outdoor movie. Albornoz described the network as a “fantastic service to the community, to bring that content to people who may otherwise have not seen it.” “It’s a win-win opportunity for everybody,” she said